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TWENTIETH-CENTURY FANTASTIC: THE NOVEL AND THE RE-IMAGINATION OF HISTORY

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Abstract

Twentieth-Century Fantastic: The Novel and the Re-Imagination of History

This dissertation investigates the resurgence of the fantastic in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction. From James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to Thomas Pynchon and Karen Russell, I attend to texts that share a strategy of representing a current, recognizable reality as fantastic. In four chapters, I reconsider work ranging from 1924 to 2013 to open up new sightlines on the fantastic and the authors under study, practitioners of what I term the "twentieth-century fantastic."

Less a stand-alone genre than a versatile narrative mode, the twentieth-century fantastic crosses generic and periodizing classifications. I define the fantastic as a capacious term for narratives in which "mystery [breaks] into real life," as Tzvetan Todorov writes, through actual and apparent phenomena that defy rational explanation, leaving characters and readers stranded between conflicting natural and supernatural interpretations of events. My grouping of texts, however, challenges Todorov's contention that the fantastic dies out after the nineteenth century. Fresh from a century when proclamations of a reality crisis became commonplace, we increasingly experience our own world as fantastic, a continual series of interpretative hesitations between rational and irrational, natural and supernatural explanations. These novels confound the tidy binary of "magical" and "realist": in violating established scientific law, common sense, and the boundary between the living and the inorganic, they are paradoxically committed to a kind of mimesis.

Recent theoretical work on the posthuman and nonhuman is important to my analysis, particularly in animal studies, object-oriented ontology, and Anthropocene studies, spearheaded by Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, N. Katharine Hayles, and Jane Bennett, among other thinkers who have reconceptualized agency and subjecthood. I introduce the fantastic nonhuman, which I argue is

a crucial prong of the nonhuman that theorists have tended to overlook. Fantastic nonhuman encounters run from apparitions of supernatural beings to religious epiphanies; they may also involve inter- and intra-subjective communions that challenge the presumed boundaries of the individual human subject, or challenge its unity. Understanding challenges to secular humanism and anthropocentrism as fantastic can also inform our understanding of what John McClure has termed the "post-secular" and Amy Hungerford calls "postmodern belief." I build on their recent work on miraculous religious and numinous experiences in literature and cultural discourse, linking it to a growing awareness of nonhuman agency and presence in daily (human) life.

In my first chapter, I read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* to show that the everyday magical is present in and inextricable from these two exemplars of high modernist fiction of the metropole. Even as these texts ostentatiously, parodically appeal to scientific paradigms and "laws of nature" in depicting human experience, they also deconstruct and denature the secular human subject in ways that render it fantastic. Orlando's fluctuating gender suggests that the supposed "laws of nature" and gender identity, invoked ironically in the novel, are neither eternal nor unchanging. Leopold Bloom, self-proclaimed "man of science," engages with animals, objects, and natural forces as animate agents in their own right, culminating in the hallucinatory, metamorphic "Circe" episode. I argue that *Ulysses* imagines subjectivity beyond the bounds of the human, leading to a broader understanding of ethical subjecthood. Further, I argue that the novels' fantastic effects are produced at least in part by their experimental use of language and narrative styles – the hallmarks of their supposed "modernism," which is usually generically segregated from the fantastic. Rather than interpreting their moments of apparent discontinuity and apparition as flashback, dream, or pure metaphor – a reading strategy that insists on reconciling them with realist conventions – I propose that we read Bloom's flashes of scenes and people from the past, for instance, as actual, inexplicable numinous manifestations.

My second chapter, on Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and Samuel Beckett's recently published short story "Echo's Bones," argues that these texts also enlist the fantastic to re-imagine and decentralize the human. In these narratives, human encounters with supernatural and even possibly divine forces ultimately give human life less meaning rather than more. In O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, miracles permeate on an atomic level, but have little legibility in human terms. Narrative itself is made less legible to humans: explanations, supernatural and naturalistic, frustrate readers and characters alike; superfluous explanations are offered and the reader is given no way to evaluate them. O'Brien's narrative of a supernatural human afterlife where materiality nonetheless dominates resembles Beckett's "Echo's Bones," in which the revenant Belacqua, inhabiting an un-Dantean afterlife where moral cause-and-effect remains inscrutable, somnambulates through a fairy tale landscape.

In my third chapter, I turn to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, to consider the particular relationship of the human to the divine in fantastic narrative, defining the divine as a nonhuman supernatural force that claims moral and creative authority over humans. I identify Morrison's and Rushdie's novels as narratives of a blasphemous fantastic, arguing that blasphemy in these novels emerges as the defining twentieth-century mode of religious practice. What other critical work has termed "ambivalence" in these novels between secular and religious worldviews, I contend, is better described as narrative irreverence, a process of active, contentious negotiation and even antagonism between the divine and the humans who find themselves sometimes unwillingly conscripted into divine service. The blasphemous fantastic functions in these novels as a narrative mode that straddles form and content, employing narrating entities that can be understood as divine observers. Both novels feature narrating voices that intermittently intrude on the events of the text, voices that convey judgment, empathy, control, and occasionally hint at their own involvement in the events they narrate as well as tempting readers toward transgressive

interpretations and then variously implying judgment or empathy toward them. These narrator-gods recall and send up the trope of the postmodern self-conscious narrator who claims to narrate the text in the process of its composition. However, self-conscious blasphemous fantastic narratives paradoxically reinforce, rather than wholly disrupting, the illusory world of the novel by making that narratorial compositional power supernatural in addition to literary: within the world of these novels, the narrators have real creative, transformative supernatural power over the unfolding events. Their presence allows for the fantastic content that they narrate, even as they sometimes explicitly acknowledge its caprice and impossibility and hint blasphemously at their own insouciance.

Expanding my argument on the fantastic as a dimension of the nonhuman, I continue to explore experimental fantastic narrative in my fourth chapter, which turns to the supernatural revenants fostered in two nonhuman-dominated landscapes, the unmappable Floridian swamp of Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* and the similarly burgeoning virtual wilderness of the "Deep Web" in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. I read these novels as responses to a world where significant portions of daily life are technologically mediated, and even conducted entirely in the virtual space of the Internet. The swamp of *Swamplandia!* remains impenetrable to human efforts at control via technology, a landscape that hijacks and repurposes the technological to fantastic effect. In *Bleeding Edge*, migration to a technologically-mediated wilderness becomes a strategy for anti-authoritarian resistance and escape: human "refugees" flee a post 9/11 New York City to seek refuge in the simulated world of the online virtual, where laws of physics and nature can be defied. This possibility stands in contrast to Fredric Jameson's account of a dark unnavigable "technological sublime" of political surveillance and control. Just as Joyce's narration of inner life inevitably becomes fantastic in translation to the page, Pynchon's matter-of-fact narration of online life produces similar fantastic effects. In increasingly long passages where the virtual world is narrated as the primary reality, excluding any mention of events or bodies back in physical "meatspace," entities

waft into being and vanish, destroyed buildings rise again, dead men are resurrected. The virtual world becomes a new spirit world, where the living can mingle with the murdered and silenced, who may still speak and act there.

Ultimately, the reality-disrupting narratives of the twentieth-century fantastic imagine a broader scope for political action, a scope that extends political agency beyond humans, and expands political possibilities for humans as well. However, this fantastic expansion of potency is the result of reconceiving the human beyond recognizability as a monad subject, and indeed may not be oriented toward or comprehensible to subjectivity-bound humans at all. Likewise, in a fantastical reflection of recent philosophical work on extended cognition, the human mind is no longer monadically bounded, nor is it tied to and limited by, a distinct physical body. Twentieth-century fantastic fiction returns to enchantment, but with a difference, and a distinct consequence: miracles, and even apparent encounters with the divine, do not confirm the primacy or integrity of human beings in the newly reenchanted cosmos. Nor does the ability to violate natural rules signal increased agency for human individuals as traditionally understood. Greater ontological freedom for human beings also means an end to human beings as such.

The twentieth-century fantastic re-tells history through refiguring and expanding subjectivity. In doing so it defamiliarizes and re-presents the present, and thus imagines a future beyond the scope afforded by strictly realist conventions that have proved insufficient for taking in the world at hand. The ramifications are not only literary but sociopolitically and ethically relevant: these (re)-imaginings and re-enchantings hint at and even depict new ways of accessing justice for past and present wrongs, especially those that have come to seem intractable. Indeed, by granting subjectivity through fantastic or fantastic-seeming means to agents that have previously been invisible through a realist lens, these narratives reveal injustices that have likewise been imperceptible as such. Justice

and injustice are figured on a wider scope, encompassing not just institutionalized disenfranchisement but various forms of what is figured as cosmic disenfranchisement beyond the bounds of secular humanist rights: death, ontological illegibility or abuse based on species and perceived sentience, limitations imposed by biomorphic or other material considerations, the progress of linear time.

Introduction

The twentieth century has been rhetorically touted as an age of scientific certainty and disenchantment of the physical world. On the other hand, it represents the erosion of the taxonomic categories of real and unreal in popular and academic discourse. Discursive extremes of hard and fast certainty and anchorless skepticism coincide. There is a similar paradox in regard to the place of human individuals in a world no longer certain of the real and unreal. The science-backed progress narrative of human mastery and manipulation of the natural through technology vies with the growing evidence that human interference has produced climatological and environmental consequences beyond human control. Current intense interest in the so-called Anthropocene period, the first climatological era caused by human activity, testifies to the extent of human agency and impact on the planet and at the same time augurs complete destruction for humankind on the not-too-distant horizon.

At its most empirical, its most rational, speculative talk of the future is also at its most apocalyptic, figuring a world transformed in ways that seem to defy natural laws as we know them, to break all historical precedents. Meanwhile, information technology supports an oneiric virtual cocoon in which many of us effectively live for part of every day, telling nonhuman cognitive agents about ourselves. Artificial intelligence for some represents the apotheosis of human ingenuity, but even rudimentary A.I. triggers primal, uncanny unease and old-fashioned feelings about the unnatural and ungodly. Unsurprisingly, for many, religious and other supernatural belief is not discouraged but stoked by all of these apocalyptic developments.

Speculation spills increasingly into the domain of speculative fiction, imagining a fantastic world not to come but unfolding in our own present. Current conversations about the nonhuman, academic and popular, frequently shade into ambiguously figurative invocations of religion,

millennialism, and the supernatural, to say nothing of the literal sense in which these themes are invoked by public religious figures. In his late book *The Gift of Death*, published in 1995, Jacques Derrida writes that, far from banishing the irrational, "[T]echnology doesn't neutralize anything; it causes a certain form of the demonic to reappear."[1] Such an animistic orientation toward technology pervades popular discourse as well, twenty years after Derrida's pronouncement. In 2014 Elon Musk, founder and CEO of electronic automaker Tesla Motors and aerospace manufacturer SpaceX – the second of which has recently announced aspirations for an "interplanetary transport device" to free humans from their dying planet – characterized artificial intelligence as humanity's "biggest existential threat." Musk warns scientists not to be too sanguine about the possibilities of AI in terms that invoke Faustian tropes and sorcerer's apprentices: "With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon."[2] Musk's authority here is, notably, a narrative heritage reaching back through romance and fairy tale. Climate change and artificial intelligence seem to threaten presumed metaphysical laws as well as natural orders, leading humans to plumb the vocabulary of pre-secular superstition in order to evoke unprecedented futures.

When appeals to fantastic narrative tropes proliferate in attempts to evoke the stakes of everyday, real-world concerns, actual current fantastic narrative is due for a closer look. What happens to fantastic narrative when life demands to be narrated fantastically? Plenty of people have always thought in terms that could be called fantastic. From belief in a personal god to belief in ghosts to belief in the Law of Attraction, fantastic sensibilities continues to be a robust, utterly

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 36.
[2] Matt McFarland, "Elon Musk: 'With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon.'" *The Washington Post*. October 24, 2014, accessed July 6, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/innovations/wp/2014/10/24/elon-musk-with-artificial-intelligence-we-are-summoning-the-demon

mainstream way of engaging the world. Nonetheless, within an ostensibly secular culture, supernatural belief is less de facto and far more likely to be elective; such beliefs have a different significance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than, say, the twelfth or even the nineteenth. What, then, becomes of a literary fantastic discourse that takes place in what is to all appearances our own ordinary world, in a time when genuine supernatural belief is necessarily at least a little self-conscious? How does the presumed antithetical dynamic between fantastic and "realistic" or conventionally realist fiction shift in an ostensibly secular, technophilic era? What can be made of the impulse to turn to fantastic narrative to evoke the stakes of current human endeavors in such a time?

What I term the "twentieth-century fantastic" is a versatile narrative mode that surfaces across generic and periodizing classifications. It constitutes a particular moment in the history of the fantastic genre but also sees that genre leap its banks. Seeking to characterize and investigate the fantastic as a literary genre and narrative mode in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, my dissertation traces a line of continuous development in influential fiction from 1924 to 2013. My readings mark the emergence of characteristic fantastic elements – instances of, as Tzvetan Todorov writes, mystery breaking into real life.[3] Mystery in this instance refers not to mundane, solvable puzzles but to occurrences that actually or apparently defy rational explanation and physical law. For me the fantastic is a capacious term, comprising a diverse group of disruptive "mystery" phenomena and experiences that might also be called supernatural, magical, or numinous. These experiences can be ambiguous and are not always unequivocally verified by empirical means within the world of the story, but crucially, the reader is forced to accept their realness for the characters of the story if they are to accept the characters as credible actors within the story world at all, and can never dismiss

[3] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 26.

their real effects within that world (and, on occasion, their real effects in our own world, as in the case of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*). The alternative, in other words, is to believe that all the characters of the story are completely disengaged from their own world and in the grips of a shared psychotic fugue; while certain of the texts occasionally flirt with this possibility, I argue that they do this teasingly, in order to frustrate and even chastise the reader who commits to that interpretation. As Todorov describes in his 1970 account of the genre in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, the fantastic characteristically leaves characters and readers stranded, "hesitat[ing]"[4] between conflicting interpretations of events, forcing both to engage in either exhausting and exhaustive rationalizations or to modify their accounts of reality. Twentieth-century fantastic texts give that hesitation a self-aware, sardonic edge through narrating voices that recall trickster figures of folktale, taunting the reader with their equivocation and also often implicating him or her, forcing the reader to commit at least provisionally to believing if the reader is to establish any interpretative purchase on the text.

The texts with which I engage, starting with experimental high modernist fiction and moving forward to novels published in the last decade, are generally not considered to be primarily fantastic, or even fantastic at all. While some, particularly those typically designated as high modernist, have been the subject of extensive literary criticism, their fantastic aspects have remained understudied, often in favor of a focus on their formal experimentation. Critical work often confines serious engagement with magical and supernatural aspects of narrative to fiction labeled as "magical realist" – usually work perceived as culturally outside the Western canon, especially Latin American fiction. "Magical realism" as a critical term tends to polarize the "magical," assumed to align with a monolithic non-Western other, against the "realism", which is aligned with an equally monolithic

[4] Todorov, 24-31.

Western narrative tradition. These taxonomic prejudices have limited critical accounts of the fantastic and even obscured its significance in Anglophone novels. My dissertation makes the case for each novel as not just fantastic narratives but significant exemplars of the particular, recent strain of the fantastic born when the natural and technological world revealed by scientific rationalism appears to point paradoxically to the irrational and mysterious. I further argue that their fantastic effects are a matter of not just content but are also in part enacted through their formal and stylistic experiments.

Why is the fantastic mode an effective narrative strategy for the geographically and culturally varied Anglophone texts that define so much of the cutting edge of modernist and postmodernist fiction? Why employ this mode over standard realism to tell stories that are, importantly, stories of "real life," set in a world recognizable as our own current one rather than a fantasy realm or distant future where supernatural marvels are the norm? I extend the literary history of the fantastic genre with an eye toward its relevance in the context of recent literature and theory, opening up new sightlines across conventional period, nationality, and genre groupings.

Further, however, I argue that in breaking with the real as we know it, these novels subvert not just literary but real-world ontological taxonomies. Depicting an enchanted world, they make visible and give voice to subjects hitherto unrecognized as such, typically regarded as passive victims at most complex or completely inert objects at least. The twentieth-century fantastic re-tells history through refiguring and expanding subjectivity. In doing so it defamiliarizes and offers an alternative version of the present, and thus imagines a future beyond the scope afforded by strictly realist conventions. The ramifications are not only literary but sociopolitically and ethically relevant: these (re)-imaginings and re-enchantings hint at and even depict new ways of accessing justice for past and present wrongs, especially those that have come to seem intractable. Indeed, by granting subjectivity

through fantastic or fantastic-seeming means to agents that have previously been invisible through a realist lens, these narratives reveal injustices that have likewise been imperceptible as such. Justice and injustice are figured on a wider scope, encompassing not just institutionalized disenfranchisement but various forms of what is figured as cosmic disenfranchisement beyond the bounds of secular humanist rights: death, ontological illegibility or abuse based on species and perceived sentience, limitations imposed by biomorphic or other material considerations, the sometimes-deleterious progress of linear time.

In choosing to focus on twentieth-century fantastic literary production and using the term "fantastic," I begin where Todorov deliberately leaves off – and implies that any account of the literary fantastic must. The twentieth century's supposed "disenchantment" and "reality crisis" alike have been invoked to argue against the value and even the possibility of literary works that effectively represent twentieth-century experience as fantastic. Criticism that uses the term "fantastic" for twentieth-century fiction must address both of these historicist commonplaces, especially since Todorov's foundational narrative study effectively appeals to both to declare the genre defunct by the end of the nineteenth century. His fantastic lasts from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth, when, as he tells it, the genre had a job to do, a social and a literary-philosophical function. Twentieth-century fantastic is for him a contradiction in terms because it loses, first of all, its utilitarian social relevance: the fantastic becomes redundant, he writes, with the dawn of psychoanalysis, which takes over from fantastic literature the task of approaching and addressing societal taboos. Those who once would have written and read fantastic tales of devils and vampires in order to explore the sexual and the morbid can now go to therapy instead.[5] His

[5] "[P]sychoanalysis has replaced and thereby made useless the literature of the fantastic." Todorov, 160-161. Ironically, though Todorov stipulates as a distinguishing characteristic that a true fantastic narrative defies totalizing allegorical readings, he ultimately seems to assert that the entire genre in all its particulars is unconscious therapeutic allegory, now made redundant with the advent of

argument here seems to align with the view expressed, albeit regretfully, by Max Weber in his 1918 lecture "Science as a Vocation."[6] Like Weber, Todorov posits that a systematized, empirical method (hard science for Weber, social science for Todorov) can now lay bare the rational mechanics of what have previously been "irreducible" mysteries that defy earthly explanation. Once such mysteries are rationally explicable – and treatable, as Todorov would have it – even if only in the abstract, they are assumed to lose their experiential resonance for everyone. The Enlightenment, it would seem, finally comes for the holdouts of ecstatic religion, superstition, and the creeping irrationality submerged in all minds that makes the fantastic appealing before Freud.

Philosophically and literarily speaking, per Todorov, the fantastic represents an era that readers and writers of the twentieth century have grown beyond. Literary discourse has moved past nineteenth-century positivism and therefore beyond the confusion and hesitation between the real and unreal that is for Todorov the central tension of fantastic narrative, when the reader asks him or herself, Did that really just happen? and, Did I understand that right? This basis in what Todorov calls "language oppositions such as real/unreal"[7] makes the fantastic now passé for him, the product of a century that "transpired[…]in a metaphysics of the real and the imaginary, [making] the literature of the fantastic […] nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era."[8] The fantastic is by this reckoning the product of Enlightenment-descended empiricism, paradoxically committed to an idea of a solid "real" even as it flirts with the unreal. The implication of interpreting some events of a fictional narrative as "real" and some as "imaginary" or "fanciful" is that, as he puts it, "everything around [them] is real[…]the literature of the fantastic posits the majority of a text as

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psychoanalysis. The demons and monsters of fantastic stories are, after all, only the repressed demons of the psyche, and can now be otherwise exorcised.

[6] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

[7] Todorov, 167.

[8] Todorov, 168.

belonging to reality[…]provoked by reality, like a name given to a pre-existing thing."[9] In the contemporary absence of any agreed-upon objective reality, Todorov argues, we have shed this nominalism. Reading is no longer an attempt to distill the "real", no longer a hesitation between the "false" and the "true", and we move forward with literature wholly aware of itself as literature, language aware of itself as only language.

On the one hand, then, it would seem that the fantastic is defunct because of the banalizing, controlled arena of science-based psychological treatment, the culmination of the Enlightenment legacy. On the other, Enlightenment notions of the empirically verifiable are no longer valid and the literary fantastic cannot be distinguished from any other literary genre. I address this contradiction by suggesting that the twentieth-century fantastic blithely makes use of both Enlightenment and pre- or counter-Enlightenment paradigms. This fantastic manifests in the recognizable form of religious experience, conjuring, and miraculous metamorphoses, events that register for readers and characters as Todorovian mysteries. However, these manifestations often come by way of less conventional channels: technological encounters, the natural world, and even the lens of scientific study. Despite the fact that these arenas are frequently regarded as the materialist dominion of Enlightenment reason, they are in fact particularly generative sites for magic and religion. The confluence is constitutive of the twentieth-century fantastic.

The resulting literature is, if anything, more closely engaged with real life than Todorov ever suggests. As critic and theorist of the fantastic Christine Brooke-Rose says, it has become a "banality" to observe that the twentieth-century represents a "reality crisis."[10] Under such conditions a fantastic that thematizes the coexistence and co-occupation of paradigms that would seem to be

[9] Todorov, 168.
[10] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3.

mutually exclusive – empirical evaluation and transcendent intuition – is a "natural" strategy for more accurately approximating ordinary, even banal, reality.[11] The twentieth-century fantastic does not give up on reality and the notions of the real and unreal by which miraculous events are understood as miraculous; it remains committed to accessing and representing a current real that urgently needs expression. As Brooke-Rose points out, to say that reality is in crisis is to make a positive assertion about reality. An "inversion," but not a complete foreclosure, of reality is the result: hat is real simply becomes that which is unreal.[12] Understood this way, Brooke-Rose's notion of a twentieth-century "marvelous-real" in fiction is not an oxymoronic formulation, and resolves Todorov's schema of a real-to-marvelous spectrum, in which the fantastic is an intermediary term, as a circle instead of a line. Further, the essential fantastic experience of confusion between real and not can only be heightened in a social and philosophical context where these categories are themselves uncertain. Despite the philosophical currents and historical events that have destabilized notions of reality, the Western Anglophone world remains invested in secular humanist paradigms and on a day-to-day basis individuals still tend, however vainly, to try to distinguish the empirically real from unreal. We expect that our material existence will continue to follow rational, empirical rules.

The twentieth century (and early twenty-first) is an arguably fantastic era that we try to decode in the manner of readers of the fantastic, thanks to this contradictory vernacular hybrid of Enlightenment and postmodern legacies. Watching the news or reading a science journal has become an occasion to ask Todorov's genre-diagnosing questions: Did that really just happen? Did I understand it right? The self-awareness that comes with postmodern fiction of itself as text is in many ways carried over into experience of the real world when so much of that world is mediated

[11] Brooke-Rose, 4.
[12] Brooke-Rose, 3-11.

through text, language, and reproduced image. Rather than foreclose conversations about what is real, the resulting multiplicity and undecidability of reality accounts pushes the question of reality to the fore. As Michel de Certeau says in describing the anarchical experience of truth in contemporary everyday life, "the real now talks constantly in the media[…]The institution of the real no longer has a proper place – the anonymous code of information innervates and saturates the body politic."[13] If the nineteenth-century fantastic served as a vent through which chimeras repressed by positivism could emerge, the twentieth-century fantastic reflects the open clash of positivism and secularism against skepticism of the former and what sometimes seems to be the widespread rejection of the latter. Neither side is giving up without a fight.

Twentieth-century fantastic novels depict what I call an additive reality. Additive reality does not unilaterally negate reality by depicting it as in crisis or altogether illusory. The novels I examine here are set firmly within a material and cultural landscape produced by Enlightenment thought, and work their miracles within and through that landscape though they also point to realms beyond it. They cannot, then, be read as merely escapist fantasy or "speculative" meditation upon a reality yet to come. Though the exact term is my own, I model my notion of additive reality on Bruno Latour's characterization of what he calls "the field of nonmodern worlds"[14] in his 1991 essay "We Have Never Been Modern." Situated as an alternative to "modern reality" and "postmodern hyperreality,"[15] Latour's nonmodern reality is foremost an additive reality, absorbing and accommodating suppressed "hybrids." Hybrids are the repressed truth behind the fiction of the Enlightenment's neat reality binaries: objective and subjective, human and animal, living and

[13] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 185-186.
[14] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 48.
[15] Latour, 131.

nonliving. Latour contends that hybrids of these ostensibly mutually exclusive, absolute opposites in fact proliferate unacknowledged but unimpeded.[16] Science cannot be separated from religion, superstition, politics, or social life. No iteration of the world can definitively cancel out another here. Like the information and souls that pile up on the haunted Internet in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* or the trackless garbage of the Fresh Kills landfill described in the novel, nothing is ever really gone or done. Contrary to the Enlightenment methodological assumption that new information constantly displaces and debunks the old, Latour argues that even the discoveries of science "add reality; they do not subtract it."[17] Seeking to break down and explain self-contradictory hybrids in terms of the old binaries, scientists only amplify the hybrid ranks. Latour argues for allowing this nonmodern, accumulative reality to step into the light, letting hybrid entities, in their swelling numbers, effectively speak for themselves. Under Latour's new "nonmodern constitution" this means a reality that reincorporates nonhuman animals, plants, and the nonliving material world as full presences.

Latour's work has become foundational for posthuman and nonhuman studies.[18] Among these fields are New Materialism or vital materialism; Thing Theory, building on Heidegger studies; animal studies; plant studies; deep ecology and theories of the Anthropocene age; and areas of

[16] Latour, 1-4, 10-14, and *passim*.
[17] Latour, 137.
[18] I use the term "nonhuman" because my emphasis is not on narrative representations of a world without or *after* humans, but on narratives that explore the present associations and imbrications of humans with nonhumans. Such narratives recast the experience of individual human subjectivity by considering human experience in the context of nonhumans, and attending to the nonhuman constituents of any supposedly unified human subject. Though such a view of human beings might well be called "posthuman" because it erodes the model of the unified monad human subject, my interest is specifically in the depiction of creeping non- or posthumanism n the literature of societies and cultures that have traditionally been, and remain, ideologically committed to the idea of the unified, singular individual. These societies may be posthuman or at least on their way to posthumanism, but they are still organized around the assumption that the individual human being is the basic unit of consciousness and agency.

cognitive studies that venture beyond or trouble the narrow brain-bound model of human consciousness to look for other cognitive agents. Work in this vein attends to previously imperceptible or long-ignored frequencies on the spectrum of agency and, in some cases, the spectrum of cognition.[19] Subsequent work in posthuman theory and vital materialism, building on this foundational essay, has sought to reconceive and describe nonhumans as agents.

However, beginning with Latour and continuing in the work of successors, attempts to evoke nonmodern worlds in operation remain somewhat abstract, though tantalizingly suggestive. Latour imagines a world where humans and nonhumans alike are "render[ed] sufficient justice" that humanism does not grant,[20] concluding that in its final realization this justice will mean the representation and assembly of nonhumans and hybrids in a "Parliament of Things" with advocates to "speak their names."[21] What non-anthropocentric, non-humanistic justice would look like, or how such a parliament would function, remains opaque. Radical though it is, Latour's description still seems limited as a feat of imagination: there are still humans talking on behalf of things. He suggests, for instance, that the same scientists he has criticized for their commitment to a bifurcated subject-object world can represent sociopolitical-natural forces like the hole in the ozone layer or the great melting glaciers. Related work runs into similar difficulties of imagination in attempting to understand existence in a more egalitarian, non-anthropocentric way include object-oriented ontology's consideration of the being of nonliving material and animal studies' similar attention to nonhuman animal existence. Considerations of what it is to be a thing, or to give justice to a

[19] See Jane Bennett (*The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*); Andy Clark (*Natural Born Cyborgs, Supersizing the Mind, Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind*); Andy Clark and David Chalmers ("The Extended Mind"); Roberto Esposito (*Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*), N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*); Bruno Latour (*We Have Never Been Modern, Aramis*); Mick Smith (*Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*)
[20] Latour, 136.
[21] Latour, 142-145.

nonhuman animal, veer into the anthropomorphic or conclude at the impasse of unknowability where they begin.

The fantastic may seem an unlikely vehicle for imagining posthumanist worlds and agentive nonhumans, but I argue here that these novels deliver on an intuition hinted but left inchoate in theoretical work: that the implications of posthuman reality lead first through the secular and then beyond it. Twentieth-century fantastic fiction provides a means for narratives set in, and about, nonmodern worlds in operation, concretizing Latourian abstractions. The novels' miraculous or numinous effects arise, notably, in close association with a range of nonhuman entities. Nonhumans that behave as agentive entities are described in fantastic, phantasmagoric terms, and fantastic occurrences are shown to arise in supposedly secular humanist discourses and their material objects of study. Directional causal relationships between the nonhuman and the fantastic are multivalent and unpredictable, but across texts, the fantastic mode works to imagine additive realities populated by hybrids. These narratives include but do not necessarily privilege human beings, ontologically and cosmologically speaking. Nor do they usually leave the monadic human beings of secular Enlightenment humanism intact. In doing so, they follow through on the transcendences that post- and transhumanism try to theorize. Transcending the human individual as the basic and only unit of agency, it turns out, requires transcendent imaginings of another kind. The anecdote that opens this introduction, a sci-tech magnate's recourse to metaphors of literal conjuring in an effort to frame the stakes of artificial intelligence, glances warily at the intuition to which these novels give full narrative.

Recent fantastic narrative merits an examination through the lens of the nonhuman. Nonhumans emerge as an essential part of this study and a defining attribute of the twentieth-century fantastic. Increasing awareness – and wariness – of nonhuman agents in popular and academic discourse and the use of the fantastic in the fiction of the past hundred years is not

coincidental. Uniting the two, I introduce the fantastic nonhuman, which I argue is a crucial prong of the nonhuman that theorists have tended to overlook in the excitement over technological and natural nonhumans. It seems to me that the divine and the supernatural are obviously examples of nonhumans as well, and overdue to be considered in terms of recent theoretical work on the posthuman and nonhuman. Previous work on the nonhuman in animal studies, object-oriented ontology, and theorization of the Anthropocene has begun reconceptualizing the categories of agency and subjecthood.[22] I suggest that a turn to the fantastic nonhuman can continue to build on our broadened understanding of both. Fantastic nonhuman encounters run from apparitions of supernatural beings to religious epiphanies; they may also involve inter- and intra-subjective communions that challenge the presumed boundaries of the individual human subject, or challenge its internal unity.

On the face of it, thinking about any category of nonhumans requires exercising a kind of magical thinking – a term I do not use in a derogatory sense – perhaps best done in fantastic fiction. Fiction, unlike theory, has the latitude to invent concrete nonhuman characters, make authoritative statements about their experiences, and put them into specific, non-hypothetical narratives of their own. Though such playful animations run the risk of anthropomorphizing their subjects, the fact remains that they treat them as subjects, with specific and obviously nonhuman bodies and nonhuman experiences of materiality. Fiction can actually perform the work that Jane Bennett calls

[22] See, for example, work (cf. note 19) done by Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Donna J. Haraway (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, esp. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"), N. Katherine Hayles, and Elizabeth Povinelli (*Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*), some of whom I discuss in greater detail further on.

for in her 2009 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*: directly addressing *things* in their "impossible singularity"[23] as it has conventionally done mostly with human beings.

Imagining the nonhuman is a topsy-turvy engagement with hitherto unseen and unsuspected forces, an intrusion of incomprehensible "mystery" into ordinary life. Thinking beyond humanism, with its valorization of the rational, takes us naturally into all manner of irrational modes including the fantastic. Considerations of the nonhuman are unavoidably playful and carnivalesque, because they involve attending to what is usually ignored or scorned, and practicing a kind of creative empathy, a game of free-form imagination. In twentieth-century fantastic novels, all manner of nonhumans serve as a new means of accessing and depicting an enchanted world that (pacé Weber) survives explicability, and is continuous with the secular humanist world that Latour imagines will be altogether replaced by the nonmodern. Technological and scientific assumptions and paradigms invoked by these narratives do not serve as mere rational foils to some persistent, resurgent magical force that is antithetical to them. Rather than filtering out intimations of the fantastic, a materialist scientific lens magnifies, or clarifies, them. Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* features meticulous botanical detail; Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* gives literally pixel-by-pixel explanations of online navigation. Secular humanism is denied its exclusivity, however. Neither technology nor the environments it shapes are shown to be quiescent instruments for human use. Natural rules, the very basis of technological innovation, apply inconsistently. One can wander unwittingly from a secular humanist, rule-obeying world into a fantastic one. Ava searches among the melaleuca for an underworld, just as Maxine browses the Deep Web for data and finds herself in touch with ghosts.

In explicitly linking the fantastic to nonhuman studies, I build on an interest in the supernatural already incipient in Latour and his successors, particularly vital materialist Jane Bennett,

[23] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

and due for more rigorous consideration. An additive nonmodern, nonhuman reality seems to imply nonhuman additions of another kind, beyond the much-discussed machines, animals, plants, objects, and network associations of the same. Equally, one could say that a full nonmodern understanding of Latour's "things" requires acknowledging an extra dimensionality within those things, understanding them as haunted or enchanted. Latour's sketch of a nonmodern real gestures cryptically at aspects of the supernatural or numinous as another nonhuman type that will be added on to nonmodern reality. Almost as an afterthought, Latour asserts that in this projected world where the Enlightenment humanist ethic of "separation" or "purification" no longer falsely polarizes the human subject away from the "nonhuman" object, the *divine* will again play a meaningful part in reality. Rather than standing "bracketed" at a distance by the Enlightenment metaphysics that made God absent and abstract, the divine intersects with the hybridized world: "Do we need to add that the crossed-out God, in this new Constitution, turns out to be liberated from the unworthy position to which He had been relegated?" (Latour 1991) Latour makes this seemingly momentous proclamation with the air of one noting the obvious, which is perhaps why he does not pursue it further. Why supernatural presence should become "commensurable" with human life along with the far more verifiable nonhumans of the material world, however, is hardly obvious; much less so, what it means to add the supernatural to reality instead of acknowledging but effectively neutralizing it as a parallel, inaccessible world of its own. What is an uncrossed God, as it were, or an uncrossed spirit world that "crosses," as Jane Bennett would say, with our own?

Like Latour's returned divine, Bennett's "vital materialism" flirts with the supernatural in trying to reconceive the ontological relationship between humans and other matter. As hinted by its title, Bennett's 2001 *The Enchantment of Modern Life* uses the word "enchantment" to refer to the "complex mood" that, per Bennett, would allow humans a fully dimensional engagement with other things – a "special way of engaging with the world." An enchanted world is by Bennett's definition

one in which humans do not "[figure] as the primary if not the sole locus of agency and vitality."[24] Bennett seems here to intuit the connection between nonhuman subject matter and fantastical events in literature, calling attention to the "metamorphing creatures" and "crossings" that pervade nonhuman-centered fiction. "[T]heir magic resides in their mobility," she says of ontologically, materially, and kinetically mobile nonhuman not-quite-others from Franz Kafka's ape-man Rotpeter to Catwoman. "Hybrids enchant" with their "dangerous but also[…]exhilarating" capacity to break rules, to change; she speaks of what seems to be a physics-defying "lightness, frictionless" freedom.[25] We might be tempted to read this transcendence of gravity and friction as rhetorical, except that in Bennett's telling, this magical defiance of the rules past the "horizon of the conceivable" is quite literal: she cites fantastic flight as a regular occurrence in enchantment narratives.[26] Enchantment, the mood that comes with witnessing such freedom, appears to be a candidate for contact with the un-metaphysical, present God that Latour promises. Indeed, Bennett proposes enchantment as an alternative to religious feeling, implying that a technologically advanced world excludes the possibility of an actual supernatural. She offers enchantment as a kind of consolation prize "within a high-tech world where God's presence, while available to many, is vague to others and absent for some."[27]

However, Bennett's work effectively focuses not on enchantment itself but on the human affective response to it. The actual significance of the actually fantastic events depicted in the novels she mentions remains oblique. After her opening claims about the magical mobility that "crossings"

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[24] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 80.
[25] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 17-19.
[26] Tellingly, Bennett has this point about flight as a motif in common with John McClure in his account of "post-secular" fiction in his book *Partial Faiths*, also influential for this dissertation, which considers the resurgent presence of religious and spiritual encounters in twentieth-century fiction.
[27] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 32.

show us, Bennett seems to bargain enchantment down to a weaker description that might be interpreted as a powerful but wholly worldly experience: a sustained intellectual sense of wonder along with "a heightening of sensuous or aesthetic experience."[28] She argues tentatively for the salutary ethical lessons of this frame of mind. To the extent that it is political, her argument focuses on the secular political implications for those humans tuned in to enchantment. Enchantment at "crossings" "might just help to induce the kind of magnanimous mood that seems to be crucial to the ethical demands of a sociality that is increasingly multicultural, multispecied, and multitechnical."[29] The events that trigger enchantment become mere placeholders, reminders of the absolute impenetrable otherness, to humans, of animals, plants, and objects.

In this way Bennett sidesteps having to account for what we might call the primary enchantment, or the magical occurrence in itself, as opposed to the onlooker's subjective experience of it. The point for her is not the primary "magic" of the metamorphoses – which begins to seem like it might as well be a metaphor, an experience more akin to Darwin's rapt yet wholly worldly contemplation of an "entangled bank" – but their capacity to arrest human interest and resist full understanding. The fictional enchanting events she uses as examples are vivid, specific violations of natural law, but the conclusions Bennett draws from them do not seem to require anything so dramatic; it's unclear why the same ethical effect could not come from a wholly naturalistic description of or encounter with the nonhuman world. Why should miraculous, literal flight be required simply to remind humans to make "room for play and for high spirits," in Bennett's surprisingly modest summary of the work that hybrid-like crossings do? She compares enchantment

[28] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.
[29] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 156.

to but sets it off from the chanted prayers of St. Augustine, an actually supernatural communion at least in the eyes of its practitioner.

Inspired by Bennett's equivocal analogization of religious practice to enchantment, I ask what happens when we take that resemblance to religion a step further, beyond fuzzy simile. Fantastic recent fiction is a useful place for exploring intersections between nonhuman theory and criticism on "post-secular" themes in fiction. It also helps us think through the nonhuman resonances of what might be seen as post-secular narrativizing impulses in other fields, including history and sociology. In some of the novels I read here, nonhuman enchantment clearly becomes a kind of religious practice, and vice versa. Both involve a transcendence of the self and an awareness of forces exceeding the natural. It is not surprising that a newly subjective, agentive nonhuman world becomes a site of religious and supernatural experience in these stories.

In recent years scholars of literature, religion, history, and political science have described the experience of contemporary life as one that cannot be accounted for wholly within secular humanism, but is also far too piecemeal in its supernatural and divine implications to adhere to any pre-humanist model of spirituality or magic. Contemporary life and contemporary fiction in these accounts exceeds the secular, but is not unaffected for having passed through it. Bennett's enchantment as a practice seems to parallel literary critic John McClure's notion of "post-secular" faith: there is no Augustinian certainty or transcendence but there is still the possibility of unbounded freedom. McClure describes enchantment-like experiences in contemporary fiction that bring characters into tentative communion with forces beyond rational explanation, and foster new communities of worship and supernatural witness that emerge across orthodox lines of doctrine and social strata that secular humanism cannot transcend. To this I add Amy Hungerford's related figuration of "postmodern" belief, or "belief without content," where doctrine is irrelevant and

supernatural belief regardless of content is ascendant. I draw as well on work done in postcolonial studies, most significantly that of Dipesh Chakrabarty, who emphasizes the long-trivialized agentive role played by human belief in supernatural entities and events,[30] and on sociological studies of "lived religion,"[31] religion as it is actually practiced and meaningfully incorporated into the lives of its practitioners.

Nonhuman theory and post-secularism remain limited in that they both tend to instrumentalize the fantastic nonhuman experience in terms of the human.[32] Bennett pays more attention to the effects and uses of enchantment in terms of humans. Likewise, post-secularism concentrates on the effects of numinous experience, whether conclusive or not, on humans and human communities. Enchantment remains, ironically, anthropocentric and individualistic in this conception, as well as passive. Human individuals are observers of enchantment rather than potential practitioners of it. They can witness the supernatural, perhaps, but not wield or summon it themselves. What enchantment-inducing objects and beings do, apparently, is arrest our attention only to remind us to reserve judgment, to draw no conclusions as our only conclusion. To hold open a space for an unknowable other may keep us from distorting it through projection, but also provides a way of absolving the human subject of further responsibility toward the other. Having

[30] See Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*). I am also indebted here to Ian Baucom's lecture "History 4°C: Search for a Method" (and forthcoming article of the same name in the C*ambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry)* at the Franke Institute of the University of Chicago on November 12, 2013. This lecture builds on Chakrabarty's emphasis on the spirit world, or in Baucom's words the "time of the gods" in connection to climate change and nonhuman agency, and first pointed me toward Chakrabarty's work.

[31] See Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe*), John McClure, (*Partial Faiths*), David D. Hall (ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*), Amy Hungerford (*Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*), Meredith B. McGuire (*Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*), Robert Orsi (*The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* and "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in Hall).

[32] I use the word "human" here in its hypostatic form because work in both areas seems sometimes to assume the old universalities of secular humanism in conceptualizing fundamentally uniform human beings or human nature on once side, and everything else on the other.

gone as far as he or she can go, the human being brushes up against enchantment and then continues life without really having to accommodate a new sense of that other and modify his or her worldview accordingly. Further, Bennett, McClure, and Hungerford all ultimately find in enchantment a redemptive possibility, a salutary effect for human communities. Humans are separate from enchantment, but enchantment is *for* them, or only considered inasmuch as it is.

I push back against this anthropocentric read of enchantment with the stated goals of theorists of the nonhuman themselves in mind, as well as the work of Chakrabarty, who cautions against interpreting his thesis on the significance of the spirit world as Marxist-derived sociological or psychological contextualization. Chakrabarty's chief point is that the Marxist materialist paradigm simply doesn't work across cultures and political systems, and the realness of spiritual life cannot be reduced to mass psychotic delusion or the manipulation of belief by cynical humans looking to consolidate political power. If not those, then, what is it? Fantastic fiction offers us a chance to take Chakrabarty literally as I have suggested we do with Latour and the Parliament of Things. These narratives regard the divine and the supernatural as believers do: complete in itself without needing to be defined by its relation to humans, driven by its own perhaps inscrutable will(s).

Twentieth-century fantastic fiction thematizes the post-secular and the nonhuman but opens up more stereoscopic vantage points on each, decentering the human. While it might be tempting, with Max Weber's disenchantment in mind, to call this process a re-enchantment, it is in fact better regarded as neo-enchantment, enchantment of a sort that is unprecedented. Something new emerges from the nonhuman's proximity to the supernatural, and the post-secular believer's undecidable encounters with it, something with the potential to reorder being as it has never been ordered before. I propose that the twentieth-century fantastic breaches deeper, stranger territory than Bennett on enchantment and the post-secularists, threatening to leave the human individual behind.

Through fantastic metamorphoses and visitations, secular humanist subjects variously break down into constituent independent parts or amalgamate with other subjects of all kinds. The earlier, modernist texts I discuss here, despite modernism's much-touted preoccupation with human consciousness, rearrange and in a sense denature human beings. As we move forward in time, the fantastic aspects of the fiction I discuss here sometimes appear wholly disengaged from human individuals as such, even when that fantastic is working through and in some sense orchestrated by them.

The texts I use challenge the primacy of human beings – and their integrity as such – in a world where nonhuman agents announce themselves ever more conspicuously. Elon Musk's anxieties about "the future of humanity," to which I referred at the outset, are mobilized and seriously addressed. Humans in the narrative look less like the fair-minded scientists Latour imagines will speak on behalf of the agentive hybrids they study and more like Musk's hapless accidental demon-summoner. Presuming to instrumentalize the nonhuman fantastic to their own ends, they discover that such forces have agendas of their own. Human beings who make the mistake of assuming that a supernatural entity or event is primarily *about* them commit a kind of hubris that will not save them from the disconcerting-to-harrowing experience of a Deleuzean deterritorialization or molecularization[33] and subsequent de-humanization by supernatural means.

"De-humanization," even with the hyphen, raises questions about the political import of the supernatural. "De-humanizing" in this instance does not necessarily have a negative connotation, though it certainly does not tend toward preserving the human individual as conceived by secular

[33] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Becoming-Animal," transl. Brian Massumi in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 94-98. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), whence this material derives.

humanism. Nor does the process of fantastic de-humanization render the fantastic politically meaningless; on the contrary, the fantastically widened spectrum of agency allows for a far broader political spectrum. The twentieth-century fantastic finds secular humanism, if not defunct, grievously incomplete as a political account of the real world. To consider (only) universal human rights is to think parochially and even unethically. In the fantastic mode new, previously unthinkable forms of justice and settlings of scores become possible. Previously ignored, invisible subjects receive the narrative representation that allows them to claim a political voice. "Everything speaks," Leopold Bloom reflects uneasily while watching a machine churn out newspaper copy. Bloom's experience of the machine is hardly scientific: the press is a fantastically cognizant, devious, and even demonic presence that threatens to drown out its human operators not just sonically but existentially, to have its say despite attempts to enslave it. The machine's impenetrable, taunting "*Sllt*", "almost human", troubles Bloom most. Fredric Jameson has described the language of *Ulysses* in such moments as "language without a speaker," and points to such moments as examples of Joyce's "unspeakable" sentences.[34] Such speakerless language, per Jameson, makes *Ulysses* "postnarrative," and therefore incapable in Jameson's view of being "human, interpersonal, expressive[…]"[35] The list of these three adjectives, as if they are essentially synonyms or at least inherently tied to each other, is telling: it would seem that the presence of a "speaker" is for Jameson the presence of human, interpersonal, expressive elements. Fantastic fiction reveals this view as chauvinistic. To call a sentence unspeakable prompts the point-of-view question, "Unspeakable for *whom*?"

Notably, many of the novels do engage with human politics, and even tend to center around disenfranchised human populations, from *Orlando*'s reflections on mandatory gender conformity to *Satanic Verses*' London immigrant community to *Paradise*'s wandering black families shunned even by

[34] Fredric Jameson, "Joyce or Proust?" in *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso, 2007), 194.
[35] Jameson, "Joyce or Proust?", 194-195.

other free blacks for their dark skin. Many of the novels featured here critique human-to-human injustices. However, the twentieth-century fantastic works without humans in mind. Engagement with the divine or the magical can serve as a liberating force for embattled humans, but it inevitably destabilizes human-drawn political lines and groupings. Unintended, unconscious communal entities form out of individuals, and individuals break down into constituent parts that fight each other for representation. As discussed above, post-secularists tend to draw redemptive sociopolitical meaning from post-secular narrative, noting the new forms of intersubjectivity that post-secular encounters enable in the narratives between previously isolated humans. Wendy Faris and other commentators on "magical realism" have reached similar conclusions about the political resistance that magical practice and possibility enable particularly for non-Western, colonized or exploited societies; for Faris such practices in themselves constitute resistance to Western-imposed secularism.[36]

In actuality, the political results of enchantment are far less legible from a human point of view than these assessments would suggest, and less predictably benevolent. On the one hand, fantastic novels deploy human political terms and imply political stakes around certain problems that are at least partly human problems, renaming as issues of injustice conditions that have previously been *faits accomplis*. Justice for humans has more possibilities than secular activism has imagined: problems identified as injustices include mortality, breaking bodies, confinement into one physical form. An angry Ava in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* realizes angrily that there is "no justice[…]and no logic" in her mother's sudden death from cancer, and refuses to accept it. The spirit world contacts she seeks out to rectify the loss, however, are by turns destructive, baffling, and sometimes simply indifferent to her. Strangling swamp flora and swarming fauna appear to have more agency in the natural-cum-supernatural world Ava enters. Framed as matters of fairness, ethics, or

[36] Wendy Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 64-65.

representation, such extrajudicial moments are framed in the narratives as questions of justice and even coded in the language of political protections but remain tend to remain inscrutable in their outcomes from a human-centered point of view. The "democracy" of water that democratically-minded Leopold Bloom admires in *Ulysses* is made visible by the empathic telepathy that Bloom tries to practice, but neither the novel nor Bloom feel any compulsion to characterize the significance to humans of this apparently material instinct toward egalitarianism. The gods and sorcerers of the twentieth-century fantastic are not anthropomorphic, if such a word can be said to retain a stable meaning in the flux that has come to complicate Enlightenment assumptions about the integrated individual as the basic irreducible unit of the human. Moreover, I disagree with Faris' tendency to align the "magical" with the non-Western, and "realism" with the West, when, as these novels show, the West cultivates its own long tradition of native magical thinking.

From the vantage point of the twentieth-century fantastic, then, handwringing about "the future of humanity" is obsolete in its terminology. Distinctions of human-nonhuman, in fact, stand in the way of clearly representing and negotiating that future. The texts under study increasingly depict worlds where enchantment means that humans occupy a smaller percentage of the agentive stage even in their own imaginations. The ever-more-apparent agency of a diverse and huge nonhuman population coming into focus makes it harder, rather than easier, for humans to project humanity onto anything that shows agency. These nonhuman agents, described in fantastic fiction in terms of the metamorphic and magical, escape the presumed confines of mechanical programming or unconscious animal instinct through the extra dimension of their fantastic aspects. Sometimes these agents bother with humans; other times they are intent upon their own ends, and sometimes they are vicious competitors, as in the case of certain divine narrators who watch over the humans.

The twentieth-century fantastic provides a view of the nonhuman in the process of something like the "turning away" that Elizabeth Povinelli foretells in her work on "geontopower," a distinctly Western capitalist division of life from nonlife that she warns is failing and will leave humans unable to continue being. Povinelli's proposed remedy for navigating the nonliving world is a kind of attentional practice that recalls Bennett's recommendations for experiencing enchantment, modeled on experience with Aboriginal cultures that do not organize the contents of the world into the life-nonlife binary. The world, in this paradigm, is paying attention to you as well, or you hope that it is: "[It is] not an indifferent world but an intensely interested one[…]every region of the world was pressuring existing forms of existence and creating new ones."[37] In turn, humans must attend to nonlife in a new way, conscious that the world "may be turning away from a certain form of existence"[38] and no longer care for them as they are.[39] This form of uneasy attention, in which there are no guarantees, is two-sided and, crucially, not aimed at necessarily preserving the human as such. The price of continued existence, Povinelli says, may be such detachment and decentering. Combining this volatile mutuality with Bennett's notion of enchantment gives us a way to read the unsettling fantastic of the last hundred years.

We might say that geontopower, the division of life from nonlife, has produced a specific kind of reality crisis, a state of "perpetual crisis"[40] in Povinelli's words, as humans attempt to conduct business as usual with a turning-away world. A world in flux, turning but not wholly turned, in which agentive negotiation is still possible and rules of science and logic may be broken: such is

[37] Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 28.
[38] Povinelli, 77.
[39] Povinelli, 59-60.
[40] Povinelli, 172.

the additive reality of the twentieth-century fantastic. Though the nonhuman and nonliving rises against the human with inscrutable consequences, remnants of the secular humanist legacy persist and can even become the sites of liberating, irrational enchantment. Where simultaneous apparently contradictory paradigms operate, secular hermeneutics are certainly destabilized. Whether this destabilization constitutes a reality "crisis" that renders the notion of the fantastic meaningless, however, is a matter of opinion. I argue that the fantastic novels I read here, in fact, provide another approach to these purported crises through their additive realities. The fantastic allows – or perhaps dooms – those who engage with it to toggle between paradigms, belief systems, and survival strategies, in touch with a wider world of beings for better or for worse. The old self-help saw that "crisis" and "opportunity" are identical words in some languages proves instructive here. Twentieth-century enchantments are opportunistic, arising out of the revelations of science and religion alike, supported and pursued through the practice of everything from empirical observation of the natural world to Ouija board spirit summonings.

In chapter one, I read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* to show that the everyday magical is present in and inextricable from high modernist fiction of the metropole. Even as these texts ostentatiously, parodically appeal to scientific paradigms and "laws of nature" in depicting human experience, they also deconstruct and denature the secular human subject in ways that render it fantastic. Orlando's fantastically fluctuating gender suggests that the supposed "laws of nature" and gender identity, invoked ironically in the novel, are neither eternal nor unchanging. Leopold Bloom, self-proclaimed "man of science," engages with animals, objects, and natural forces as animate agents in their own right, culminating in the hallucinatory, metamorphic "Circe" episode. I argue that *Ulysses* imagines subjectivity beyond the bounds of the human, leading to a broader understanding of ethical subjecthood. Further, I argue that the novels' fantastic effects are produced at least in part by their experimental use of language and narrative styles – the hallmarks of their

supposed "modernism," which is usually generically segregated from the fantastic. Rather than interpreting their moments of apparent discontinuity and apparition as flashback, dream, or pure metaphor – a reading strategy that insists on reconciling them with realist conventions – I propose that we read Bloom's flashes of scenes and people from the past, for instance, as actual, inexplicable numinous manifestations.

Chapter two, on Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (composed 1939-1940, published 1967) and Samuel Beckett's recently published short story "Echo's Bones," (composed 1933, published 2014) argues that these texts also enlist the fantastic to re-imagine and decentralize the human. In these narratives, human encounters with supernatural and even possibly divine forces ultimately give human life less meaning rather than more. In O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, miracles permeate on an atomic level, but have little legibility in human terms. Narrative itself is made less legible to humans: explanations, supernatural and naturalistic, frustrate readers and characters alike. Superfluous explanations are offered and the reader is given no way to evaluate them. O'Brien's narrative of a supernatural human afterlife where materiality nonetheless dominates resembles Beckett's "Echo's Bones," in which the revenant Belacqua, inhabiting an un-Dantean afterlife where moral cause-and-effect remains inscrutable, somnambulates through a fairy tale landscape.

I turn to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in chapter three, to consider the particular relationship of the human to the divine in fantastic narrative, defining the divine as a nonhuman supernatural force that claims moral and creative authority over humans. I identify Morrison's and Rushdie's novels as narratives of a blasphemous fantastic, arguing that blasphemy in these novels emerges as the defining twentieth-century mode of religious practice. What other critical work has termed "ambivalence" in these novels between secular and religious worldviews, I contend, is better described as irreverence, a process of active, contentious negotiation

and even antagonism between the divine and the humans who find themselves sometimes unwillingly conscripted into divine service.

Expanding my argument on the fantastic as a dimension of the nonhuman, my final chapter turns to the supernatural revenants fostered in two nonhuman-dominated landscapes, the unmappable Floridian swamp of Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* and the similarly burgeoning virtual wilderness of the "Deep Web" in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. I read these novels as responses to a world where significant portions of daily life are technologically mediated, and even conducted entirely in the virtual space of the Internet. The swamp of *Swamplandia!* remains impenetrable to human efforts at control via technology, a landscape that hijacks and repurposes the technological to fantastic effect. In *Bleeding Edge*, inhabiting the simulated world of the virtual, where laws of physics and nature can be defied, becomes a strategy for anti-authoritarian resistance and escape. This possibility stands in contrast to Fredric Jameson's dark unnavigable "technological sublime" of political surveillance and control. Just as Joyce's narration of inner life inevitably becomes fantastic in translation to the page, Pynchon's matter-of-fact narration of online life produces similar fantastic effects. In increasingly long passages where the virtual world is narrated as the primary reality, excluding any mention of events or bodies back in physical "meatspace," entities waft into being and vanish, destroyed buildings rise again, dead men are resurrected. The virtual world becomes a refuge and a new spirit world, from which the murdered and silenced may still speak and act.

The reality-disrupting narratives of the twentieth-century fantastic imagine a broader scope for political action, a scope that extends political agency beyond humans, and expands political possibilities for humans as well. However, this fantastic expansion of potency is the result of reconceiving the human beyond recognizability as a monad subject, and indeed may not be oriented toward or comprehensible to subjectivity-bound humans at all. That state of anarchic opportunity

has permanent effects, and will not be restored to recognizable order in the tradition of *Midsummer Night's Dream* fantastic narratives. The supernatural forces that emerge are not purgative, an exorcism that allows a return to ordered, rational life after the excesses and exorcism of Walpurgisnacht enchantments or carnival inversions. Metamorphic, ontological inversions here are permanent, as is the transformed notion of the human that accompanies them for the reader.

Chapter One

Modernist Fantastic: Transforming and Re-imagining the Subject in Woolf and Joyce

Having hurtled into "the present moment" (*O* 298) – that is, ten A.M., October eleventh, 1928 –the titular protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* discovers a world as matter-of-factly fantastic in its underpinnings as she has become. She recognizes this pervasive enchantment in the fittingly banal and miraculous location of a department store elevator. Come to buy sheets and sardines, Orlando finds herself nonchalantly levitating:

> The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying – but how it's done, I can't even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns.
>
> *O* 300

We are not told exactly when Orlando lost her belief in magic, and indeed we have never been explicitly informed of any such belief. Her offhand acceptance of her extraordinarily long life and metamorphosis from male to female suggests an inattentive, if not uninterested, attitude toward the magical. What is clear is that magic resurfaces in this moment not as an interruption of Orlando's everyday life but as its primary substance. Magic is paradoxically concrete here – woven into the "fabric of life" down to Orlando's new machine-made linens.

The moment is explicitly designated as magical in the text, but a concrete, empirical realness coincides with that supernatural mystery. *Orlando* portrays a modern magic that suffuses the material and cannot be banished by scientific materialism. Similar enchantments attach to the fabric of life down to the atomic level in James Joyce's 1924 *Ulysses*, where a "scientific temperament" seems to inform not just Leopold Bloom's sensibility but the meticulous, superhumanly mnemonic narrating voice of the novel. That voice enumerates Bloom's appreciation for "the aeronautic parachute" and

the "suction pump" (*U* 17.) alongside a magical pestilence-repelling potato, and transcribes the dialogue of medical students, cats, priests, and printing presses with equal attention. Bloom appeals to what "can be explained by science" and is "only a natural phenomenon" (Cyclops) but also takes ghosts and astrology seriously. "Circe," the transcript of a wholly sober but decidedly irrational journey through Dublin's red light district, is less sui generis than it looks within the context of the novel: ghosts and machines mingle and come to bewitched life throughout the narrative.

These high modernist juxtapositions of science and magic, natural and supernatural, both evoke and contradict Max Weber's famous 1917 pronouncement, in his lecture "Science as a Vocation," that the "world is disenchanted," that "no mysterious incalculable forces[…] come into play[...]but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[1] Universal science-based explicability, even if only theoretical, rationalizes the world irreversibly. In the same lecture, however, Weber also tracks a popular, aggrieved antipathy toward the scientific and the rational, a perverse human tendency to connect the real to the spiritual or magical. Despite declaring natural phenomena and technological innovations alike utterly knowable, from trolleys to thunderstorms, Weber goes on to describe the divorce of science from daily life as most people live it. Science occupies an "unreal realm of artificial abstractions" (Weber) that cannot, he says, have transcendent meaning for humans. Science is ultimately not a sufficient account of reality for most people, even though it debunks other accounts. It can never, in Weber's poetic and somewhat mysticizing words, "grasp the blood-and-the-sap of true life," can never represent the world where "genuine reality is pulsating." "Today's youth," he claims, will scoff at the idea that anyone could arrive at "true *nature*"

[1] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

– personal or general – through science (Weber). In Weber's estimation the "real" has come unglued from science in the public imagination, taking the nebulous category of nature with it.

Yet, complicating Weber, *Orlando* and *Ulysses* marry miraculous events and beliefs with regular explanatory appeals to science and nature, out of which a distinctly modern enchantment is born. Where Weber gloomily sketches a society made up of multiple but completely segregated world accounts, incommensurable realities, *Orlando* and *Ulysses* patch together paradigms and epistemologies. *Orlando* and *Ulysses* frequently become fantastic narratives at the heart of the empirically demonstrable real. Rather than dispel the irrational with a rational gloss, the arc that Tzvetan Todorov describes in pre-twentieth-century fantastic narrative, *Orlando* and *Ulysses* put the irrational and the rational into resonant conversation with each other. Within the scientific process of knowledge-gathering whereby the post-Enlightenment West has been accustomed to know the material world, a puckish irrationality emerges at both ends: in the natural world, the assumed raw object matter of modern Western science; and in technology, the product of applied scientific findings.

Objects and processes that represent the culmination of rational thought, and that Orlando knows are the result of applying scientific methodology, *trigger* Orlando's epiphany about enchantment in the elevator. The novel's nonchalant portrayal of its central character's sex change, which necessarily precedes its final "present moment" act, perversely insists that the event is "natural". The narrative's onward free-associative flow gives the reader little time to start rationalizing the fantastic transformation or any of the others that occur. The style induces something much like the mysterious "distraction" specific to the twentieth century as characterized in the novel, leaving the reader, like the titular character, unable to even "begin to wonder" his or her way toward disenchanting explanations.

Ulysses, meanwhile, controverts Weber's thesis even more thoroughly, finding experiences of the numinous *in* explanations and descriptions that take on the numinous rhythms of sacred liturgy or incantation. Its central figure tenaciously pursues his inquiries to the point of inventing explanations that verge on fantastic in their content and the novel's depiction of the creative process by which he works – a kind of visionary imagining that borders on vatic. Wondering is just the beginning; his eager consumption of knowledge and explanatory reveries lead him into supernatural communions of all kinds.

This chapter argues for reading both novels as examples of a high modernist fantastic that builds fantastic worlds from the self-conscious languages and artifacts of modernity and appeals to reality. Rather than return to premodern settings and romance conventions in imitation of its generic forerunners, these novels arrive at the magical through, not in spite of, the new and the "real" as empirically understood. The effect is born in part of the miraculous science- and nature-related content, and also in part of a narrative style that, in its dutiful obeisances to "Truth" and "nature," as Orlando puts it, comes to seem ambiguously tongue-in-cheek and mocking toward readerly commitment to an objective reality oriented around stable human subjects. The novels implicitly and sometimes explicitly insist that they are set in the consensus-based reality of modern life and dovetail with modern historical narrative, suggesting a methodology of observation and chronological documentation throughout. *Orlando* is published in 1928, the exact "present moment" in which it claims to be set, and along the way various passages supply the exact dates and hours at which they are supposedly composed. Woolf bills the novel as "a biography". *Ulysses*, meanwhile, famously takes place at the specific time-place coordinates of June 16, 1904, in Dublin, a day rendered with painstaking verisimilitude of topographical, historical, and material culture detail. Each world is furnished, literally and figuratively, with all the concrete material objects and details that Roland Barthes sees as guarantors of a story's "reality" (Barthes). This solidly material reality does not melt

away, however, with the introduction of fantastic elements. Literary realism is both echoed and parodied in the service of the fantastic.

The obsessive performance of historical and scientific documentation mischievously encourages a detail-oriented, even pedantic type of reading – witness the elaborate historical and biographical annotations available in reading companions for both novels, especially Joyce's[2] – that enhances a formally induced fantastic effect specific to high modernist fantastic narrative. While the overtly fantastic story events are born of an enchanting modernity, the particular experimental formal techniques of the novels inculcate a fantastic sensibility in readers, introducing an oneiric quality that opens the text to fantastic interpretation. The techniques most prominent here include the associative, nonlinear and nongrammatical flows often described – though not undisputedly – as "stream of consciousness," self-conscious word play and word games, fragmented narration, tortured syntax, semantic opacity, shifting points of view, dense allusion and citation, and deliberate attempts to stretch the novel genre through borrowing from other narrative forms. Not coincidentally, these are also techniques frequently associated in literary criticism and history with high modernist fiction, and cited as attempts at technical innovation, strategies by which modernist writers sought to "make it new".

In connecting formal experimentation to the fantastic, I both draw on and differ somewhat with Brian Richardson's more recent narratological study *Unnatural Narrative*, which takes up fiction from roughly the same breadth of time as the novels I consider and includes some authors in common, notably James Joyce and Flann O'Brien.[3] The titular "unnatural," "antimimetic" narratives

[2] See, for instance, Harry Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996); and Don Gifford with Richard Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's* Ulysses, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), both periodically updated.

[3] Like Todorov, Richardson opposes the realistic to the magical. (Todorov, 56) Richardson's unnatural narratives are allergic to science just as Todorov's fantastic is: science and scientific

rupture the illusion of continuity that obtains in mimetic narrative between "our" world and the world of the text.[4] My chief difference with Richardson is this use of the terms "unnatural" and "antimimetic" in reference to the fantastic and formally unconventional textual objects he takes up. Mimetic narrative, per Richardson, takes place in an assumed agreed-upon "world of our experience".[5] "Antimimetic" effects include miraculous or strange plots and also formal subversions and quirks such as a self-conscious narrator, metatextual elements, or stylistic and generic changes such as the play form of "Circe."[6] All of these, in Richardson's schema, place narratives outside the mimetic and therefore outside realism, outside the natural, and outside of "the world our experience," which is distinctly separated from the world of the text. I disagree with the assessment of high modernist experimental form and fantastic content as inherently un-realist and unnatural, at least in terms of Richardson's definition.[7] I argue that the kind of narratives Richardson describes can and often do bear a mimetic relationship to the agreed-upon "real" world, if an unconventional, counterintuitive one. Nonetheless, I agree that the varying narrative types identified by Richardson involve breaks in the apparent "natural" order of common reality, and that certain formally experimental and supernatural texts are narratologically related. Richardson does not make explicit

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explanations are specifically singled out for alignment with the realistic and natural even in narratives that do not represent the "world of our experience," as in the case of science fiction. Science fiction, per Richardson, is "not usually unnatural" because it "attempts to construct entirely realistic narratives of events that could occur in the future; the mimetic impulse remains constant." (Richardson 10) Whether such speculation is based in sound science is, apparently, beside the point. The consensus is that by definition science and magic do not mix. This position accords with Bruno Latour's observation of "separation" or "purification" (Latour, 11, 13, 31, and *passim*) in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Per Latour, the post-Enlightenment West insists on the absolute estrangement of, among other spheres, science and religion, as well as the natural and the supernatural. It is perhaps unsurprising that these taboos show up in literary criticism, as well as in public, sociopolitical discourse and individual intuition.

[4] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 3.
[5] Richardson, 3.
[6] Richardson,
[7] Richardson, 3-5.

the link between narratives made unnatural by supernatural content and narratives made unnatural by formal play; I set out to do so here. As I discuss in my consideration of form in *Orlando* and *Ulysses*, many of the experimental formal methods Richardson uses to diagnose unnatural narratives give readers initial interpretative impressions that are in effect supernatural.

These characteristic techniques produce narratives that are, if anything, made more fantastic simply through the telling. Characters' dreams, daydreams, speculations, and memories stream through the text without any quotation marks, contextual clues, or tags to set them off within the narrative from actual events and dialogue exchanges. They blend with the asides and clarifications of shifty narrators. We seem to look in from impossible angles and vantage points at times. Indeed, part of the struggle for the reader is often simply to determine what is actually happening on a literal level in the narrative – what action, if any, has transpired, whose thoughts are whose, which moments are private and which public. We are set up by the novels' historical and geographical specificity to read pedantically, primed by conspicuous – and sometimes conspicuously perverse – narrators to attribute significance to every detail as if reading coded messages. It is not surprising that guides fully as long as *Ulysses* itself exist to track its every reference. A naïve reader may momentarily think that a figure from Leopold Bloom's past has in fact appeared in front of him in a Dublin street, or that he has somehow teleported to one of the oriental paradises he imagines. Orlando's dreamy reveries are hard to distinguish from supernatural visions.

We may be tempted to resist these as simply the misreadings of beginners unfamiliar with modernist style. I argue that there is value in this kind of apparent misreading, and indeed that in a sense these literalistic misreadings are ultimately validated by *Orlando*'s real metamorphosis, the surrealistic lapses of time around her, the apparitions and animations of *Ulysses*' "Circe." We begin to see new narrative possibilities and new subjective perspectives for fiction. As I discuss in the section

of this chapter on *Ulysses*, Fredric Jameson argues that *Ulysses* gradually becomes linguistically claustrophobic, culminating in a total disappearance of narrative illusion that leaves only opaque language-in-itself. It sheds characters and becomes "language without a speaker."[8] "Circe," Jameson says, "takes place much too close to the eye," leaving readers unable to read in a visualizing, imaginative mode.[9] The resulting work becomes, in its final episodes, "post-narrative" because of its supposed loss of subjects – it is, in Jameson's telling word choice, "depersonalized."[10] I suggest that in fact if we are willing to read literally and laterally, the too-close onslaught of strange juxtapositions and seemingly nonsensical syntax pushes us toward imagining beyond the usual bounds of narrative and subjectivity as we understand them in high modernist texts and Joyce and Woolf particularly. Depersonalized texts do not automatically forfeit narrative.

Ultimately, the fantastic mode at work here identifies and narrates subjects that have previously gone unnarrated and unrecognized as subjects. Through fantastic occurrences, the texts reconceive the human in terms of nonhuman agents in ways that both recall the old claims of religion, superstition, and orthodox Enlightenment secularism and also anticipate the turn toward the nonhuman in the work of late twentieth and early twenty-first century theorists.[11] As human bodies undergo fantastic transformations and human minds behold fantastic visions, the boundaries of the human erode and their surrounding, sometimes constitutive nonhuman peers can be perceived as agentive and narratable. Subjects emerge where before there seemed to be none, as in

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[8] Fredric Jameson, "Joyce or Proust?" in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 195.
[9] Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 165.
[10] Jameson, "Joyce or Proust?", 194, 198. I
[11] See Jane Bennett (*The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics,* and *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*); Roberto Esposito (*Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*), N. Katharine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*); Donna Haraway (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*); Bruno Latour (*We Have Never Been Modern, Aramis*); Elizabeth Povinelli (*Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*); Mick Smith (*Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*).

the speaking objects of the "Circe" episode. Things themselves, even banal mass-made objects, cease to simply be products and claim a right to be represented, or what Walter Benjamin would call in his discussion of the possibilities of cinema, a "claim to being reproduced."[12] The traditional Western human subject is usurped and ultimately pulled apart, and the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism is rethought when commodities and raw materials are shown to have specificity, will, and ends beyond human design and human use.

Ulysses and *Orlando* frame this representation as a matter of justice and ethical awareness. The modernist fantastic does not offer the straightforward redemptive humanist vision that these words might suggest, however. Fantastic re-imagination destabilizes gender, race, and class norms in these narratives, and thereby engages with human sociopolitical concerns including gender and sex equality, wealth redistribution, bigotry, and humanitarianism. Fantastic re-imagination and destabilization does not stop at the unit of the human, though: in questioning gender dichotomies or fatalistic economics, fantastic justice also addresses nonhuman subjects, and addresses humans in nonhuman terms. Such justice, if justice it can be called, may not be *for* humans, though it affects them.

In setting out to describe modernist fantastic narrative and the political stakes of that resulting narrative, I join a longstanding critical conversation about modernist fiction, genre, form, and politics. While I am not overly invested in periodization and indeed, this study draws out continuous thematic and formal tendencies across supposed "modernism" and "postmodernism," it is necessary and illuminating to consider previous considerations of what and how modernism is

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", 2nd version (1936), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 34.

political. A literary critical commonplace holds that modernist fiction is artistically and particularly formally radical or radical-aspiring but sociopolitically detached or even consciously reactionary in its presumption of artistic autonomy. Artistic radicalism, in fact, has been portrayed as inhibitive to political engagement: modernist fiction's departure from traditional social realism has been cited as evidence of this political detachment. An old guard of Marxist theorists and critics – prominently, Georg Lukacs and Erich Auerbach – argued that modernist literature is politically unproductive because its experiments with form means that it is not strictly realist. There are two assumptions here that require further scrutiny: that realism is the only effective mode for politically engaged fiction, and that the literature resulting from modernist formal experimentation is insufficiently engaged with the "real".

Responding to these objections, scholarly work of the 1980's and 1990's delineates possible abstract, theoretical resonances between leftist political concerns and modernist formal innovation.[13] Other critical work considers modernist form in relation to specific historical context and contemporary political realities, often pointing out modernism's development in the metropoles of the West as a way in to examining questions of colonialism, exploitation, racism, and European and American social change.[14] Marianne deKoven finds that modernist fiction expresses political stakes through, and not in spite of, its purportedly unrealist form. Her account of modernist formal effects does not fully characterize her chosen texts as fantastic, but, like Richardson, she suggests their proximity to the supernatural. deKoven emphasizes the oneiric "strangeness" with which formal

[13] See, for instance, Eugene Lunn (*Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*), Raymond Williams (*Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*), and Perry Anderson's article "Modernity and Revolution" in *New Left Review* (March-April 1984).
[14] See, for example, Perry Anderson ("Modernity and Revolution" cf. note 14); Fredric Jameson ("Modernism and Imperialism" in *The Modernist Papers*); Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonization" in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Seamus Deane); Terry Eagleton ("Irony and Commitment" in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Seamus Deane); Marianne deKoven (*Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*).

experiments imbue the fiction she analyzes, noting the uncanny "gothic[...]controlling conventions" present in some.[15] deKoven at one point objects to a particular critical tendency to downplay an ambivalence in certain modernist narratives that recalls Todorovian hesitation around apparent miracles. She charges that strident "antiapparitionist" interpretations of "The Turn of the Screw," for instance, "becomes readable as an act of [misogynist] repression."[16] For deKoven there are sometimes political stakes to reading modernist narrative as supernatural or at least possibly so, stakes that would be lost without an appreciation of supernatural possibility. deKoven finds that the seemingly fantastic narrative styles of "Turn of the Screw" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" express contemporary anxieties and interests in real gender- and class-based injustices.

Wendy Faris makes a similar but more explicit argument about the political possibilities of the fantastic in her discussion of "magical realist" narratives, linking fantastic events to an expanded radical political imaginary. Her emphasis is particularly on the transformative and salutary political possibilities that magical realism enables in postcolonial literature, especially that of Latin America. She argues that, as indicated by the seemingly paradoxical hybridity of the genre's very name – magic, real – magical realism combines linguistic and formal aspects both of the Western realist novel and the traditional storytelling modes of now-postcolonial nations once occupied by Western imperial powers. Magical realism puts previously unavailable and even unthinkable justice in reach through "a component of spirit that undermines many colonial paradigms since it often operates toward past and belief rather than toward future and material progress." As such, this component

[15] Marianne deKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 39.
[16] deKoven, 48-49.

can bring the past forward, highlighting historical injustice and violence, making past present through ghosts or mysteriously reoccurring, repeating events.

Intentionally or not, Faris suggest that magical realism requires a West-non-West hybridity at its origin in order to fully realize its possibilities. "Magical" seems most of the time here to align neatly with the resurgent postcolonial culture. The West can only bring realism to these unions. With that goes the binary alignment of Western scientific reason and empirical proof with realism; science is a byword for reason, and reason a byword for the West. Faris is careful to note some examples of magical realism that arise outside of postcolonial cultures, and specifically explicitly acknowledges that Woolf and Joyce anticipate many of the themes that later magic realist fiction will explore. Her overwhelming emphasis, however, is on postcolonial literature, particularly New World Spanish-language fiction. She figures *Ulysses* and *Orlando* as simply lesser iterations of these themes, hampered by a lingering commitment to realism. Per Faris' account, Joyce and Woolf have used a kind of prototypical magic realist mode to "[question] the boundaries of the self […and] the separateness of our identities."[17] Nonetheless, their sallies into the fantastic merely set off the work of writers like Gabriel García Marquéz and Laura Esquível, who interrogate those boundaries "in more radical form," and "extend that questioning of boundaries even further and in more concrete detail." The modernist fantastic of Woolf and Joyce is magical realism manqué for Faris.

This chapter follows Faris' claim that the introduction of "a component of spirit," broadly construed, allows a work of fiction to deal more exhaustively with occluded parts of past and present and to do political work. However, I extend that claim to this pair of novels not typically designated as "magical realist," novels that come out of milieus with a specific but different

[17] Wendy Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 32.

orientation to Western imperialism and colonization. Both are tangent to the British metropole, albeit distinguished by the fact that Joyce comes out of Ireland, a sort of special-case intimate British colony, and Woolf writes as an English woman, a demographic she frames repeatedly in her work as to some degree foreign in its own land, constitutive of an "Outsider Society". I argue that, like Faris' examples of full-fledged magical realism, *Ulysses* and *Orlando* "[overturn] the assumptions of Western empiricism and [question] the binary opposition of magic and realism from the perspective of another cultural or narrative tradition that lacks those assumptions and that opposition."[18] *Orlando* and *Ulysses* depict daily lives of characters in the supposedly metropolitan West who are neither wholly citizens of the metropole nor entirely rational or even stable subjects in the mold of Western individualism. Indeed, they question whether anyone, London-dweller or colonial subject, is any of these things.

Common to both deKoven's and Faris's analyses of the political import of fantastic form and content is the assumption that human beings are the basic, irreducible unit of political subjectivity. In order to have political resonance, formal and narrative choices have to reflect the world of human politics. Faris' concerns are, as mentioned above, are chiefly with repressive political regimes and imperial violence on the human cultural and individual levels; deKoven addresses domestic social issues of the metropole including the position of English women and the English working class. Accusations of modernist "dehumanization" must be undone or explained around to get to the political: evocations of miasma-like drifting fogs and smells are simply read psychologically as metaphors for human sociopolitical anxieties. Meanwhile, Faris argues that *Ulysses* and *Orlando* remain limited as magical narratives because they offer psychologically plausible characters in the convention of realism.

[18] Faris, 28-29.

As I note in the remarks on Jameson above, I contest the notion that a dehumanized or nonhuman text is not narrative. I challenge as well the further assumption, implicit in deKoven and Faris, that modernist narrative remains "humanized". To the contrary, this chapter argues that *Ulysses* and *Orlando* show that the radical political work of fantastic form and content does not and indeed cannot stop at humans as the only subject for justice. Nor does fantastic form and content uphold the human subject intact. Enchantments that destabilize gender binaries, class distinctions, science-religion divides, and individual boundaries go on to find narrative subjects beyond the human, on different scales. For Joyce and Woolf, the combination of modernist innovation with fantastic content and the intersection of secular and spirit zones is a tool for imagining a world organized outside the terms of human individuality. That imagining requires nothing short of a metamorphic new understanding and expression of material reality. Their most challenging moments of formal experimentation coincide with their most fantastical, and most politically challenging, content.

Found in Translation: Trickster Narratives and Natures in Orlando

Orlando is utterly at ease with a nature that contradicts itself, a nature with no set laws, or unnatural ones. The introduction of a term so amorphous and sprawling as "nature" demands a definition, but a stable, confined one is hard to draw from the novel despite its constant use of the word, sometimes capitalized. In moments of apparent biological or logical contradiction, the narrator frequently addresses nature and the natural specifically to insist upon the narrative's "truth" in fantastic moments, either arguing that the events depicted are natural or flatly stating that if they are unnatural, the reality of the events is not affected. Nature's relationship to reality is a complicated one: some parts of the narrative make it clear that being "against nature" in the world of *Orlando* does not make something false or impossible, while others suggest laws of nature that are more capacious and capricious than conceived in Western sciences. The narrator implies that fantastic

(il)logic and inconsistency is required in order to tell the whole truth of nature(s), to sufficiently represent that natural world in writing as Orlando him/herself struggles to do throughout his/her preternaturally long and fantastic life. A naturalist approach to describing sex, gender, and the experience(s) of human subjectivity becomes identical with a fantastical one.

Nature in the novel acquires an agentive, sometimes mischievous whimsicality through this unpredictability. These elements recall the supernatural tricksters of folk and fairytale. The narrator shares this trickster spirit and reinforces *Orlando*'s playful magical reality with narrative tricksiness. Like the novel's bodies and landscapes, descriptive passages transform miraculously before the reader, optical-illusion-style. Ambiguously aligned with nonhuman nature over humans, the narrator presents itself[19] to the reader as interpreter and guide to nature and naturalness, volunteering rationalizations of events in response to an anticipated readerly skepticism. In their scrupulous, obsequious acknowledgement of impossibility or implausibility, these rationalizations begin to feel ironic, patronizing, and even hostile. The narrator's customary capitalization of "Nature," too, begins to seem ironic and mocking toward human anthropocentrism as the novel continues and the figure of a monolithic, anthropomorphic, proper-noun nature is undermined. Not only is nature unpredictable in the novel's world, it is filtered for the reader by a narrator who has no intention of holding it to account for its inconsistencies or challenging it on that basis.

Throughout *Orlando*, a kind of fantastic slippage or drift allows nature to admit of miraculous possibilities. *Orlando* reconciles the natural with the supernatural and the magical with the scientific not through clashes but through a dialectic process of inexorable and seamless transformation or

[19] It's difficult to know how to refer to the *Orlando* narrator. Choosing a gendered pronoun seems at odds with the entire project of the novel: it anthropomorphizes a voice that frequently hardly seems human in point of view, as well as reasserting the gender binary the narrative systematically erodes. "It" does not seem an ideal choice but I use it for lack of a better.

syllogism of things into their apparent opposites. The most obvious example is Orlando him-herself, but translative slippage is also necessary to enable and describe the national and temporal milieus through which Orlando wanders. Disregarding demarcations among the different organizational models of the world that it comprises, *Orlando* depicts pastiches of gender, time, and cosmological paradigms that give onto each other matter-of-factly.

We see this fantastic translative process at work in the space of a paragraph early on, when the novel calmly depicts an England under natural laws so warped that they suggest the supernatural. This passage demonstrates three distinct types of slippage by which the real touches the fantastic: merging natural history with a mythic world of everyday mmiracles; abstract supernatural belief with practical material concerns; and, most slyly, premodern temporality with modern. During the reign of the notably superstitious King James, a "Great Frost" strikes the country with hyperbolic consequences.

First, natural history and myth run up against one another here, neither quite displacing the other as a narrative mode. The event is recognized not as a supernatural curse or spell but as a "frost," a term that assigns it to the category of common meteorological phenomena. It is located in real history and space in the England of a nonfictional political leader. Its effects, however, accord more with Biblical or epic logic. In style and content, the narrative of the episode places it in the register of the tall tale, immanent in time and place, despite simultaneously insisting that "the age was the Elizabethan" and the places, tame and real bourgeois enclaves:

> Birds froze in mid-air and fell like stones to the ground. At Norwich a young countrywoman started to cross the road in her usual robust health and was seen by onlookers to turn visibly to powder and be blown in a puff of dust over the roofs as the icy blast struck her at the street corners[…]The severity of the frost was so extraordinary that a kind of petrifaction sometimes ensued; and it was commonly supposed that the great increase of rocks in some parts of Derbyshire was[…]to the solidification of unfortunate wayfarers who had been literally to stone where they stood. The Church could give little help in the matter, and though some landowners had these relics blessed, the most part preferred to use them either as landmarks, scratching posts for sheep, or,

when the form of the stone allowed, drinking troughs for cattle, which purposes they serve, admirably for the most part, to this day.

O 33-34

What Enlightenment separation would assign, respectively, to the realms of the sacred and the profane, goes undifferentiated in the face of a baffling natural extreme that shades into supernatural. The Great Frost is historical and mystical, its miracles preserved in gossip and lore by "onlookers" but also found in extant material artifacts. It is domain that geologists, anthropologists, and priests will have to share.

The resulting second form of slippage, marrying the revelatory supernatural to everyday routine, follows, providing both philosophical and practical recourse. The traumatic apparent loss of life is accommodated and memorialized by survivors through existential strategies from abstract supernatural belief to the labor of day-to-day subsistence, which resolve into one other. The stones fit into the cult of religious object veneration and the practice of animal husbandry, suggesting that religious mysteries are as pedestrian as sheep, or sheep as transcendent as religion. Indeed, despite their miraculous metamorphic provenance, the Great Frost victim stones are less likely to be marked out as religiously significant and more likely to be used practically. Their ongoing use allows victims a kind of continued existence alongside survivors, wherein the lost continue to have an active community presence in changed form. That that response might be regarded as unsentimental or inhumane is a further indication of a Latourian pre-separative, non-anthropocentric world that sees natural phenomena as continuous with human life, humans with nonhumans, living with nonliving.[20] The attitude conveyed here toward nature and its vicissitudes is not a humanist one.

[20] An interesting point of comparison is perhaps Elizabeth Povinelli's account, in her book *Geontologies*, of contemporary aboriginal Australians' relationship to certain nonhuman "dreamings" that have familial and cultural significance, including a series of stone formations. Families and

Finally, the narration of the passage works to gradually ease the Great Frost into the realm of current, mundane possibility. The description rambles on until it resolves, surprisingly, in a present day continuous with the age of the Frost. The slippage is worked in a notably tricksy way, with the narrator first seeming to feint in the direction of fencing off the fantastic from readers' reality. As if to soothe readers unsettled by these flagrant violations of natural law, the narrator cozily reassures them of a difference that penetrates at the level of the cultural and behavioral but also the natural and biological: "The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even." (*O* 26-27) Elizabethans live in a time governed not only by different mores but different laws of nature as well. This is not just a different climate but a different physical order, we are to understand, at a temporal, cultural, and metaphysical distance from the modern. Contemporary Western readers, disarmed or lulled by this disavowal, are left free to contrast this attitude toward nature with their own. That this practical use of the stones continues, however, "to this day" hints at what later chapters gradually reveal. On whatever day readers find themselves, the quotidian, taken-for-granted beliefs, values, and customs that form their sense of the reality of daily life may derive from Orlando's magical experience. Presumably, the narrator is confident the stones will continue to be in use in any future to come, given that the "this" means the statement will apply indefinitely. The narrator fails in the end to grant readers the metropolitan, Enlightenment order they have been primed to expect in contrast to the cosmic promiscuity of long ago. Orlando's twentieth-century response to the elevator is no less supernatural or blasé in its assumptions than that of the Elizabethan shepherds' to the Frost. Throughout the novel, these

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communities share duties of mutual acknowledgment and protection with dreamings, which have a kind of life regardless of what they are, and also may change or "turn away". This way of thinking about the stones is possible in part because they do not observe a divide in terms of life and nonlife, in contrast to a late liberal capitalism system that largely ignores, even cannot see, "the undead and nonliving" (116). Povinelli's overall conclusion is part warning and part, as she says, "elegy": she argues for using the insight into the falseness of the life-nonlife dichotomy to imagine a world that may be "turning away" from protecting and supporting life as we know it.

slides into "the present day" from periods initially set off as the "Age of" or "[*n*th] century" repeatedly connect contemporary life to times of miracles.

This sly demonstration of contemporary, post-Enlightenment realist and naturalist continuity with fantastic time and events anticipates the novel's naturalization of its most dramatic magic: Orlando's change from male to female. Like the description of the frost, the transformation is slowly familiarized and naturalized after the narrator initially appears to emphasize the shock and rupture constituted by its development. In the moment of change, readerly assumptions about what is natural and what can be learned by assessing naturalness are destabilized by the narrator's riddling analysis of the event, which encourages readers to get on with the facts in the same way the peasants adapted to the stones. The "simple fact" remains that "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since." If this is "against nature," the narrator shrugs, "let biologists and psychologists determine," (*O* 139) but such a determination would not, by implication, undermine the truth value of the statement.

The events and their descriptions upset common sense and logic with a self-satisfied nonchalance on the part of the narrator. Confoundingly, the narrator cedes rather than denying the authority of biology and psychology, but does not follow what would seem to be the logical assumption that what is unnatural is untrue and unreal. The truth – the "Truth," indeed – is that Orlando is female, against nature. What would seem to be a sequence of common sense logic does not match up in the final assessment with truth, and must be substituted by an apparently illogical sequence of statements to be assessed as true. As if relearning the rules of logical argument, we are sent back to examine our initial premises. Either the fact of being against nature does not make something false – nature is not equivalent to truth – or nature is more capacious and more mutable than "biologists and psychologists" conceive. Preconceptions about what is "natural" and otherwise

are no longer necessarily reliable metrics for deciding the real, and therefore must be revised or possibly discarded.

Having only granted conditionally that the change may be "against nature," the narrator goes on to bypass the stalemate with biologists and psychologists by folding it into the natural order. Refusing to pronounce definitively on what is "against nature," *Orlando* characterizes nature as mutable and offers a fantastic that is a continuation, and not a suspension, of the real. The novel troubles the central assumption of Todorov's definition of the fantastic, which determines what is unreal (and therefore what is fantastic) by determining what is unnatural. In *Orlando* a seemingly unnatural fantastic event may simply be a misidentified natural one governed by clauses seldom invoked in natural law. Such an event still has a special status, but one more akin to having occasion to observe a rare planetary alignment or a deep-sea eruption. The event itself may not be uncommon, but it is rarely perceptible to human eyes.

We witness such a moment in Orlando's transformation. It is presented as fantastic in our first view. Then, the narrator gradually naturalizes it without compromising its marvelousness or bargaining down its literality within the world of the novel. Where Weber cannot imagine a naturalistic explanation that does not disenchant, *Orlando* accompanies a fantastic-seeming occurrence with an explanation that leaves the magic intact. The circumstances of the change are sudden and unquestionably fantastic in their narrative tropes: Orlando falls into a weeklong deathlike swoon, like many an enchanted sleep of fairytale and myth. Over her unconscious body, a trio of weird sisters personifying modesty, chastity, and purity confront the sexless figure of Truth, who drives them back when they try to deny the change that has taken place. When she wakes, she is a woman. Similar abrupt transformations take place elsewhere, and as she later discovers, a former female admirer becomes a man. Orlando will later give birth with this female body, the same body

that it is suggested, in her former life of selfish dalliances, may have fathered children: the actuality of her material rearrangement is borne out with a mockingly heavy hand for the most pedantic and prurient believers in gender binarism.

Yet the work of transformation is not wholly done, and a number of adjustments follow that clarify the political implications of Orlando's change and also work the "against nature" change back into the natural order. Ultimately, Orlando's physical metamorphosis is made to look relatively minor and routine within the realm of personal evolutions, and the most remarkable changes are those that occur after, not in the moment of, her magical bodily transformation. These changes, the ones that matter to Orlando and the other characters, are gradual and naturalistic. The nature of Orlando's magical transformation to female is never made completely clear. Perhaps to assume it means she has a female body as typically biologically defined is to limit the possibilities of that transformation, but at any rate she and her various companions express little interest in it. Whatever the state of Orlando's body and mind, it means less to her English contemporaries than the clothing she assumes after discovering that she is female. Clothes "change our view of the world and the world's view of us," opines the narrator, noting that a ship's captain becomes chivalrously solicitous once he "saw Orlando's skirt." (*O* 187) Femininity of the patriarchally delimited type dawns upon Orlando gradually: she eventually becomes "a little more modest, as women are, of her brains" (*O* 187); she continues for some time to dream of a female lover "through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention." (*O* 161) Orlando's "frame" has stayed "human," to which the qualifications of male or female are subordinate and can only work slowly and partially upon it.

Nonetheless, the narrator stops short at a denial of sex difference, maintaining that a true fantastic change has been worked and that this is not a case of a woman dressing as a man or a man

as a woman: we are not allowed to doubt either that Orlando was previously male or is now female. The changed clothes and behavior are "a symbol of something hid deep beneath," and it is "a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of woman's dress and of a woman's sex." Further, she is exceptional in her reaction to this change but not in the change itself:

> [P]erhaps in this [change] she was only expressing rather more openly than usual – openness indeed was the soul of her nature – something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed[…]Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.
>
> *O* 189

Orlando is, then, a fantastic, chimeric figure, but hardly notable for this in itself. She is a special case in her acceptance of herself as a fantastic exception to the laws of nature-culture that she has come to know, and in her willingness to acknowledge her fantastic fluctuation despite the laws. The "vacillation" of mind and body is universal, though, unbelievable though it seems, few notice it.

Orlando's awareness of her body's fantastic potential is empowering and politically charged. Having accepted her transformation consciously, she is able to allocate her attention more deliberately and effectively than those who cannot cast off "the distraction of sex," and she prioritizes accordingly about the supposedly inherent properties that it confers upon her. Aware of her mutable sex, Orlando can take a cold view of the onerous expectations that she be "obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature." She engages only deliberately, as it suits her, in "the sacred responsibilities of womanhood" that "in other circumstances, she would have been taught as a child." (*O* 157) With the narrator, she concludes that she is indeterminable: "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided." The pronouncement defies readerly attempts to rule on this matter for themselves; it "cannot now be

decided," (*O* 190) as if we have passed into a time when it is uncategorically unknowable.[21] Nor are the effects of her change merely personal: they force change upon a thoroughly sexist legal and political system that tries to confine full political and legal subjecthood to men. Upon her return to England about three hundred years after leaving, Orlando is hit with lawsuits claiming "(1) That she was dead and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) That she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing." However, she finally receives a ruling that she is a woman and, contradictorily, a property owner, a ruling that shouldn't be able to exist under the law of the land. Orlando's transhuman life span and metamorphosis confound the courts, which do not know how to process her into a place of second-class citizenship in the usual way, and set a new precedent for what is legally possible through the performance of an apparent physical impossibility, a kind of magic trick.

The novel's fantastic arc accomplishes a similar political coup in that it introduces itself first as the "biography" of a male protagonist. Having secured readers' attention and investment with a central man, the narrator can change the rules midway. The move reinforces the trickster-storyteller narrative ethos. Like a supernatural string-puller, the narrator turns Orlando into a woman who becomes the focus of the novel by what is effectively narrative sleight-of-hand. What has been default and assumed about political and historical actors, and about narrative subjects generally –

[21] Distraction, as Walter Benjamin writes not long after *Orlando* in his 1936-published consideration of twentieth-century technology's effect on art, constitutes its own distinct mode of attention. What the twentieth-century proletariat need, per Benjamin, and get through popular cinema, is distraction training – not in ignoring distraction but in swimming within its stream. Well-trained practitioners become adept at a form of "casual noticing" that occurs gradually through use and habit, an embodied method of perception that is, as Benjamin would have it, superior to merely "optical" contemplation. Only those who can negotiate distraction will be equal to the "tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points." (Benjamin 266-268) Fantastic by nature, Orlando doesn't struggle much with her own perception of and accommodation to historical turning points; like Benjamin's moviegoers, she takes spectacular shocks and surprises with equanimity, able to see and rise to a succession of previously unimaginable futures.

their maleness – is undermined through fantastic metamorphosis. The maneuver is particularly tricksy in that it deploys what may be a reader's sexism and privileging of men over women, exploiting the norm of male supremacy in Western literature and society by starting with a character who can lay claim to readers' attention and imaginations through his maleness. After associating Orlando thoroughly with traditionally female-excluding discourses of nationhood, power, and tradition, the narrator suddenly pronounces him a woman. This move leaves us with a woman who cannot be touched by the usual patriarchal Western bugbears of constructed femininity, a female-bodied person free from the impeding "veils" (*O* 135) of modesty, chastity, and purity. Nothing less than literal magical thinking can accomplish this subversion of "nature"; the story becomes magical because it has to here.

Imagining a woman in the fullness of her personhood, then, both from her point of view and that of others, requires exceptional measures that suspend not just conventions of decorum but conventions of realism. A world where this is possible would be a world with necessarily different human laws and physical ones as well. Such an imagining affects and upsets nature and politics both, a fact that suggests they are closer than post-Enlightenment Westerners would like. The sacred boundaries of science-politics, objective-subjective, and nature-human are all confounded here to highlight their dependence on one another. Beyond enabling a feminist narrative, Orlando's magical transformation allows her and the narrator to explore sex and identity ad absurdum, destabilizing "male" and "female". Orlando finds the qualification of womanhood retroactively imposed on her rather than assumed from birth, and, having a previous sense of herself as a whole and unqualified subject, she is thus able to separate herself from the associations that go with *woman*. Orlando has become a woman but, the narrator assures us, "in every other respect[…]remained precisely as he had been." (138) That identity can endure across such a transformation suggests that sex is not fundamental to identity or that human subjective identity was never stable in the first place.

The stakes of enchantment in *Orlando* ultimately prove larger than human gender politics, though Orlando's sex change pulls out the first thread. Nature itself is denatured, or supernatured, starting with this blithe transformation "against nature." Supernatural nature reaches out to claim and reincorporate the human subject as Bruno Latour warns that it must with the breakdown of false Enlightenment separations.[22] We see this point made not only through Orlando's unnatural, and then naturalized, transformation, but also through the composition of the narrative itself, a struggle to articulate the natural that is echoed by Orlando's effort to write on his-her own favorite poetic theme, nature. These parallel efforts nudge the novel toward a consideration of the place of the human individual within the natural world. Nature is highly resistant to human linguistic expression, as Orlando learns to his great frustration as a young poet trying his own hand at interpreting it with naturalistic fidelity: "In order to match the shade of green precisely he looked[…]at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush[…]After that, of course, he could write no more[…]The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. Moreover, nature has tricks of her own." (*O* 16-17) One of these tricks is to entice the writer, as Orlando himself is enticed after this attempt at transcribing green, to abandon writing and go for a walk outside. Nature itself is too seductive and too absorbing for humans to be able to trust their own accounts of it. We cannot separate ourselves from it for long, and looking "at the thing itself" in order to better ascertain its characteristics is more likely to prove distracting than clarifying. Tricks like this are relatively undramatic and unfantastic in comparison to the trick that the story will later play on readers and on Orlando too, but they prepare us for a fluctuating and agentive natural world in which human will and human individuality have far less pull than we might imagine.

[22] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Trying to speak of nature distorts and convolutes the very language of the narrative sometimes. At one point, when Orlando stops in the midst of a flurry of writing, the narrator sees fit to discuss this "pause" in an exhaustingly wordy and over-claused sentence that attributes to nature both the pause and the onslaught of recollections, desires, and ambitions that fills it. This is trickster nature as a mad hybridizer, happy to frustrate every human intuition of the "natural" and coherent:

> Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbows and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous, for the poet has a butcher's face and the butcher a poet's; nature, who delights in muddle and mystery, so that even now (the first of November, 1927) we know not why we go upstairs, or why we come down again, our most daily movements are like the passage of a ship on an unknown sea, and the sailors at the masthead ask, pointing their glasses to the horizon: Is there land or is there none? to which, if we are prophets, we make answer "Yes"; if we are truthful we say "No"; nature, who has so much to answer for besides the perhaps unwieldy length of this sentence, has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us – a piece of a policeman's trousers lying cheek by jowl with Queen Alexandra's wedding veil – but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is a seamstress, and a capricious one at that. We know not what comes next, or what follows after.
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> *O* 77-78

The lengthy citation is necessary to give a sense of the passage's metastatic vitality. This attempted meditation on nature overwhelms and perverts language and literary device. The introduction of distracting trickster nature into a meditation on human consciousness is an oblique approach to begin with. We are accustomed to set off the workings of the human mind from nature – we use our minds to contemplate nature as observers, after all – but here the failings and tricks of cognition are the tricks of nature.

Identifying human thought as part of nature effaces the human; Orlando and his pause disappear utterly from the passage. The narrator darts from Orlando's pause to the ancient clash of the body with the mind, an irresolvable entanglement in which nature "delights." The narrator goes on to blame this smug nature for his or her own quotidian distraction within the controlled human-built environment of a house. Human thought does not set us apart from unconscious nature but

turns out to be nature thinking through us. The narrator's stab at a metaphor drags the paragraph further afield – or out to sea – spinning a complicated maritime allegory in which vehicles and tenors are conflated and uncertain: land, water, ships, and sailors are all unanchored.[23] Like the supernatural nature it tries to render, the passage is distracting and distracted, and by the time it has rattled to an "unwieldy" close, none of the "odds and ends" it has touched on have come near to explaining Orlando's by now long-forgotten pause. In trying to look at nature or show it to others, we are constantly diverted by it and we lose focus; meanings and rules change while we are distracted.

To describe the natural is, in *Orlando*, to write the fantastic; however closely to reality the writer tries to hew, putting words to nature is bound to produce a fantasy. Anyone concerned with exploring the real nature of the natural must loosen his or her grip on it, must allow for it to shift constantly and unpredictably, without discernible purpose. Writing the "true" means writing a mutable, enchanted nature. Nature is itself distractible as well as distracting. The solution proves to be moving toward, rather than away from, depictions that seem fantastic. The lesson a nature-besotted, metaphor-choked Orlando ultimately learns, after sublime urges to throw herself into mountain lakes or off promontories in despair of ever capturing what she sees, is that it is better for her to keep a little distance from nature, to defer pronouncement on its mysteries. Distraction allows her to exist comfortably in the presence of the numinous and overwhelming. Like her protagonist, Woolf appears to turn away from what nature is usually taken to be in order to examine and describe it. Her novel must evoke seemingly wholly "unnatural" circumstances and event sequences in order to examine the supposedly "natural" and fundamental division of the sexes. What looks experimental and non-mimetic in Woolf's narrative is in this sense not the repudiation of nineteenth-century naturalism but an application of its principles that simply, in fact, takes the

[23] That even discussing this metaphor has engendered a number of horrible puns is perhaps further confirmation of the passage's ability to produce distraction and linguistic tangents.

traumatic findings of the scientific age into consideration: the Earth and its inhabitants are not timeless and unchanging but subject to radical change and variation across space and time.[24] Anticipating Arthur C. Clarke's famous pronouncement on technology, sufficiently advanced naturalism of all kinds becomes hard to tell from magic. Woolf's narrator, indeed, makes a claim for the hero(ine)'s sex change as simply clear-eyed mimesis. Like Orlando, she is in her own estimation "only expressing rather more openly than usual[…]something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed." In its fantasticness, *Orlando* tells it like it is.

As part of nature rather than outside observers, humans too become versatile, creative figures of magic, politics, and science in combinations that have not previously seemed thinkable. Todorov's contention that there is a special relationship between language and fantasy and his equivalence of the fantastic with the supernatural – he writes that the "supernatural is born of language alone because language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent"[25] – is thus incomplete: any translation of nature into language will look fantastic as well. Writing about what is "natural" becomes a way of fantasizing and calling new understandings of nature into being, or even synthesizing new natural possibilities like a sorcerer. This type of fantastic narrative has a real-world function not unlike the one Todorov describes in certain of his own examples, wherein marvelous content appears subordinate to the affective result of fantasizing for reader and writer: "What seems to matter[…]is not what one is dreaming about, but the fact that one is dreaming and the joy that the dreaming provokes." (Todorov 103) Joy alone, however, is not the only real-world result that the fantastic can achieve. *Orlando*'s narrator, indeed, anticipates not joy but readerly consternation at

[24] Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 97.
[25] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 82.

content that the narrator knows will be taken as a challenge not just to the natural order but to the political one as well.

Rendered in all its fantasticness, nature becomes visibly political where it has been invisibly so for so long, and its rhetorical loyalties can be reversed. In representing nature as fantastic, *Orlando* both recruits it in the service of a liberating gender destabilization and seeks to foreclose the possibility of its use as a weapon by those who would call gender-bending "unnatural." The unspoken question the novel poses is, are current presumptions of a fatalistic gender dichotomy that applies to all individuals at all times less bizarre and unreal? Rhetorically potent as an agent of misogynistic repression, nature serves just as powerfully to subvert this imperialism if conventional discourse about nature is interrupted and its fantastic vicissitudes and mysteries, in all their distracting detail, are made harder to ignore.

Ulysses: Transformative Empathy, New Subjects, and Nonhuman Narrative

Like *Orlando*, *Ulysses* offers a world full of mundane objects, devices, and activities, as well as real locations contextualized in historical time and meticulously rendered. Indeed, on the level of content alone, *Ulysses*, apart from the "Circe" episode, does not seem an obvious choice for a study of the fantastic. Leopold Bloom, a committed realist and self-styled man of science, has what seems to be an unremarkable day in a circumscribed life. The lurid presence of "Circe," however, in all its singularity both within the text and within the English-language high modernist tradition generally, is hard to dismiss. What is "Circe" doing there? Just how much of an exception, just how singular, is "Circe" actually within the novel?

The dramatic form appears to set "Circe" apart, as does the topsy-turvy sensibility of its dreamworld, but I will build a case that this strangest and most magical of episodes constitutes the climax of a natural escalation within the novel. "Circe" is not a break but a continuation of the

approach to reality that is modeled and practiced throughout, in content and form. Subtler enchantments and physical metamorphoses transpire and subjectivities fluctuate and blur into one another in the text, prefiguring the anarchic content and aesthetic of "Circe." The fabric of twentieth-century life in *Ulysses* is magic as well. Instances of superstition, religion, and magical practice are all present and vital in text, which treats them as commensurate – interwoven – with scientific, pseudoscientific, and technological references. The dreamlike, enchanted logic of the drama form in "Circe," where language becomes performative and words call fantastic events into being, is also presaged in the novel's earlier formal experimentation. Attempting to render inner subjective and outer, ostensibly "objective" landscapes comprehensively, the text itself produces undecidable fantastic moments wherein readers might – and often do – ask Todorov's questions: Did that just happen? Did I understand it right? The heteroglossic buzz of individual minds, dialogue, description, narratorial commentary, and blurred intersubjective exchanges allow for fantastic readerly impressions and interpretations in even the text's most apparently conventional moments.

Ulysses' heteroglossic narrative style gives the reader a discursive mix without clear indication of how to apply conventional common-sense hierarchies in even just distinguishing plot events. At least to the new reader, flashbacks, fantasies, and even photographs described or names shouted can intrude on the interpretative process and present themselves as narrative events in the way granted to the descriptive claims of traditional third-person omniscient narration. Readers must pivot and reroute with the vicissitudes of the point-of-view character's thoughts, which produces an effectively fantastic effect in which whole vanished or distant places can become as palpable – or more so – than the place where the character is actually located in the moment. Dead or imagined figures are, in given moments, more present in a character's thoughts than warm bodies passing within inches of him or her, and if we are in that characters' thoughts, our sense of who and what is real follows

theirs. I argue for attending to the seemingly naïve fantastic readings – what might be called naïve misreadings, even – that the text enables, on the grounds that such readings are in fact legitimate and supported by the text. Experimental writing requires experimental reading. At his most experimental, Joyce is also at his most fantastic.

These type of supposed misreadings are typically only controlled and corrected for because, if let go unchecked, they would make the text into a succession of literal apparitions and teleportations, and we know or think we know that that is not the story we are supposed to be getting. In fact, *Ulysses* offers what seem to be the realist hallmarks of pedantically precise, true-to-life detail and psychological character depth without disallowing fantastic possibility. Indeed, that fantastic possibility often seems to grow out of painstaking attempts to render currents of thought and even just sensory stimulus in the narrative subjects. On the page, Bloom's daydreams, supernatural beliefs, and memories are not set off from his observations of the world that serve as reports to the reader about what is going on in the narrative's present moment. Approaching acquaintances, boiling kettles, and ringing bells are interspersed without transition or disclaimer among imagined journeys, fantastic (pseudo)scientific speculations, and haunting visions of other minds and other bodies. It is frequently difficult at first to distinguish these moments of inner activity from the outer action at hand. Even veteran readers of the text can easily take fantasies and memories for events occurring in the narrative's real time. These individual moments express an irrational, fantastic sensibility that runs throughout the novel, and to read them as such is to see that (ir)rational order emerge.

A contained example is Leopold Bloom's morning vision – one of a number – that equivocally puts a Middle Eastern landscape on the page, temporarily overlaying the Dublin street. The third-person narrator, still in fairly regular evidence at this point, gives us Bloom negotiating

sidewalk obstacles, "avoiding the loose cellarflap of number seventyfive." Bloom notes a breadvan delivering its wares, thinks of the funeral he will attend later in the day, and then, suddenly, the scene is reset: "Somewhere in the east: early morning: set off at dawn." We walk with Bloom down a different street, "[…]awned[…]Turbaned faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops[…]A mother watches me from her doorway. She calls her children home in their dark language." In the next moment Bloom deflates the vision, admitting, "Probably not a bit like it really," but for the space of the paragraph, the fantasy landscape exists in detail as minutely realized and present in the text as the Dublin street with the obtruding cellarflap. We may view it equally as Bloom's conscious fabrication, something more akin to a hallucination, or a genuine remote-viewing or clairvoyance on his part. In the moment, he seems to walk as tangibly through the eastern city as he picks his way down the Dublin street a few sentences previously. The vision also links Bloom telepathically to Stephen Dedalus, who on the same day has woken from a repeated dream of eastern tourism wherein open passageways beckon him in and "creamfruit smell" of melon issues out. The dream or vision seems to be outside of both men, existing on its own and intruding of its own accord into their minds with a consistency and vividness that defies coincidence. Stephen's phantom taste of Middle Eastern fruit goes on to tantalize Bloom, who imagines buying land through a Zionist initiative and planting it within lemons and oranges. As readers, we are given an early hint of the hallucinatory logic we must accept in "Circe," when Haroun al-Rashid himself makes a cameo appearance in the Nighttown streets.

Fredric Jameson argues that in "Circe," narrative falls away altogether and language, having from the beginning threatened the dominance of the *récit* through a profusion of attention-grabbing puns, allusions, and sentences that seem to transform like optical illusions into strings of sound, finally thickens into opacity. The effect of "Circe" is in one sense linguistically claustrophobic, as Jameson writes. "Circe" and its miracles unfold "much too close to the eye," (Jameson "MI" 165),

and we do not have the perspective-supplying, more conventional narrative commentary of the earlier episodes that would allow us to back up and get our bearings. As far as Jameson is concerned, we are at last completely unable to read in an imaginative, visualizing mode: ironically, when they are so "close to the eye," the words can no longer "be characterized as images." (Jameson 165) We perceive the words as words, in other words; we look at rather than through the page.

For Jameson this supposed absence of narrative brought on through the dominance of language is a characteristically modernist abdication of mimetic realism. "Circe" demonstrates a "new non-personal way" of producing an "utterly unnarrative presentation" of what can no longer be called a story. This "radical depersonalization of language" is for Jameson a symptom of the "historical realization," finally complete in the modern era, "that consciousness as such cannot be represented, and that it must be conveyed indirectly, by way of the detour of things." (Jameson, "JP," 194) Such an "approach to the Real" means for Jameson an absence of direct human communication and, it seems, a negation even of the possibility of representing or narrating the human to the human. The language of *Ulysses* is "language without a speaker," and therefore incapable in Jameson's view of being "human, interpersonal, expressive[…]" (Jameson, "JP," 194-195) The list of these three adjectives, as if they are essentially synonyms or at least inherently tied to each other, is telling. Working backward, it would seem that the presence of a "speaker" is the presence of human, interpersonal, expressive elements. The implied logic of this comma sequence seems to be that what is expressive necessarily occurs interpersonally, between or among persons, which is to say humans.

Like *Orlando*, *Ulysses* does, I agree, evoke the twentieth-century real by stepping away from conventional presentations of subjects. Interpersonality is most thoroughly affected by this step. Building slowly to the outright marvelous world on show in "Circe," the novel imagines human

subjectivity – if it can still be called that or only that – radically restructured and redistributed, porously bounded if at all. However, where Jameson attributes the vivid fantasy of "Circe" to "the impersonality of Joyce's autonomous language," and finds in the "post-narrative" "Ithaca" episode the consummation of this impersonality, (Jameson "JP" 198) I see instead in both episodes a continued radical *personalization* – or, to avoid the tang of anthropomorphization, a radical unfixed subjectivization that permeates form and content. Subjectivity flows like an aquifer through and under characters, objects, language, and the material text itself. The absence of the "directly" interpersonal is not, here, the absence of the inter*subjective*, and therefore does not foreclose the possibility of expression and even communication.

Rather, new possibilities of expression emerge, linking the human in communication with the nonhuman. As Bloom himself intuits, the modernist "detour of things" through which human communication passes may not in fact be a detour at all, but a full rerouting. Like the acceptance of all-pervasive nature's constant distractions in *Orlando*'s modern age, taking the detour of things in *Ulysses* become a necessary way to negotiate modernity in all its natural and technological excrescences. Such detours perform the crucial work of blurring the nonhuman into the human, the magical into the rational. Through a sort of alternative scientific and philosophical materialism, *Ulysses* arrives at a patchwork pantheism. Being stirs in things on the narrative level and on the formal as well; every other word seems to squirm and change. The language that closes in claustrophobically for Jameson can also open outward. The reading experience becomes, if anything, agoraphobic – or, for the sterner of heart, spacious. *Ulysses*' later episodes are not so much "post-narrative" as neo-narrative, finding subjects for narrativizing where previously writers and readers saw objects.

The creeping spread of subjectivity[26] into objects is answered by an encroachment of objects upon subjects. I argue that Joyce's employment of them to narrate human consciousness is no "detour" but an inclusion, at last, of elements without which a representation of consciousness is incomplete. Objects prove to be *part of* subjectivity. *Ulysses* thereby destabilizes conventional methods of identifying and locating minds: objects may have subjective mind-like elements either on their own or in concert with other objects and humans.[27],[28] Individual human minds require the fantastic prostheses of other humans and other things. This interconsciousness, a raised consciousness aware of previously ignored players, provides ways for rethinking individual selves and societal organization. As a novel that tries to represent and even instantiate this radical

[26] As mentioned above, in analyzing the new, reenchanted understanding of human-nonhuman dynamics that *Ulysses* models, one of course runs up against the thorny problem of avoiding anthropomorphization while working in human language that inevitably tends to anthropomorphize, or at least to animate, in attempting to talk about the nonhuman and nonliving. These terms of course imply the human- and living-centered Enlightenment separations, and it is hard not to recapitulate those even in an attempt to discuss such separations' dissolution – to assign "subjectivity" to objects seems of course simply to pull them across the subject-object divide and reassign them to the category of subjects without challenging the subject-object separation; to talk about them as "animate" or "alive" is to tacitly endorse the living-nonliving binary. Latour calls such hybrids "quasi-objects." In order to avoid the confusion of defining a word with itself, I will follow N. Katherine Hayles in using "agents" to designate nonliving things that, independently, seem to demonstrate some degree of cognitive or affective capacity. However, because one of the main concerns of this study is the place of the human – however marginalized – in twentieth-century narrative, I focus here on collaborations between so-called subjects and so-called objects rather than the objects in isolation; my interest here is not so much in theorizing the "being" of nonhumans and the nonliving but in examining how they act on humans.

[27] N. Katherine Hayles makes an argument similar to this in her consideration of cognitive agents; she argues that nonhuman assemblages (anything from a computer to a simple mechanical filter) may be regarded as performing cognitive functions. Though Hayles carefully distinguishes between conscious entities and cognitive ones – cognition may exist without consciousness – I argue that the line between consciousness and cognitive capacity is not easily discerned in *Ulysses*, as are the lines where one distinct cognizing consciousness begins and another starts.

[28] The work of cognitive philosophers, foremost Andy Clark and David Chalmers, who theorize the "extended mind" or "extended cognition" is also relevant here. In their original 1997 essay "The Extended Mind" Clark and Chalmers suggest that external devices, objects, and even other people may be regarded as composing a single cognitive system with the biological brain of a person who depends on and trusts them as he or she trusts her own brain.

collaborative form of consciousness, *Ulysses* is both fastidiously faithful to the everyday material experience of life in a body and also nightmarishly bizarre. Tame objects and words interact with embodied humans in apparent defiance – or perhaps in redefinition – of natural law.

Bloomology: Accumulative Science

The novel's move toward nonhuman, beyond-human pantheism and accumulative subjectivities begins with Leopold Bloom's thoroughly empirical and thoroughly fanciful, accumulative approach to knowing the world. Bloom harbors his share of magical beliefs but frequently tests and arrives at them through logical, if idiosyncratic, applications of scientific method, as *Orlando* approaches the supernatural through the natural. Bloom's worldview is one of cosmological bet-hedging. Despite his pretensions to a scientific inclination, he retains throughout *Ulysses* a wary respect for matters irrational. For Bloom, the achievements of science and technology exist in the same world as superstition and the supernatural, and he interacts with each as if they are not parallel but intersecting.

Science, as assembled by Bloom, is robustly ecumenical, an all-purpose epistemological field that necessarily accommodates pieces of multiple belief systems that have come before it. Bloom's science is science in the etymological sense, a radically inclusive discipline of knowledge-gathering, from the occult to the zoological. It is an inherently multiple discipline that subsumes the fantastic in the scientific and the scientific in the fantastic; Bloom is buying everything that is for sale epistemologically speaking. *Ulysses* presents not so much a negation of the nineteenth-century positivist, scientific "real" as a refusal to set this standardized science-based real up in opposition to the fanciful or miraculous.

Bloom's taste for "applied, rather than[…] pure, science" is a taste for science as we live it. Bloom's is a science informed by something like Hungerford's "belief in belief" – not science

without content, certainly, but science without centralizing dogma in regard to methods of investigation or appropriate subject matter. Bloomology is not a jealous discipline. All sources of information are viable and worth remembering and relaying, from popular magazines to conversations with Dublin cabmen. Bloom and his pronouncedly eclectic personal library do not subscribe to disciplinary divisions. Catalogued in "Ithaca," his books snatch variously at the truth of the human body, the human soul, the physical and metaphysical heavens, authorized and unauthorized accounts of the world and its doings. *Physical Strength and How to Obtain It* accompanies *Philosophy of the Talmud*; *A Handbook of Astronomy* stands beside *The Hidden Life of Christ*; the dry *History of the Russo-Turkish War* is matched by the salacious-sounding *Secret History of the Court of Charles II*. Reflecting on the phenomenon of astronomical parallax as explained in Robert Ball's *The Story of the Heavens*, one of the books later mentioned in the "Ithaca" inventory, Bloom muses, "I never exactly understood. There's a priest. Could ask him. Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax." (*U* 8.110-112) The impulse is silly but also has its own undeniable logic: why not expect a priest, supposed expert on one kind of heaven, to have a bead on all things celestial?[29] The story of the heavens contains, for Bloom, both astronomy and the secret life of Christ.

Above all, Bloomology is science reimagined and expanded to the fantastic. It is an ongoing practice of trying to know things hitherto perceived as beyond scientific, "natural" knowing: what it is like to be other than oneself, what a world other to this one would look like, what stirs in the depths of one's own mind. This speculative science may be understood as a kind of counterpart to speculative fiction. As speculative nonfiction, Bloomology tries not only to reimagine but to alter the

[29] Of course, Bloom's most immediate, conscious reason for consulting the priest may be that he expects to priest to have studied Greek, but even the assumption that such learning will be helpful in explaining the astronomical observational effect is evidence of Bloom's multidisciplinary openness: as if subscribing momentarily to some sort of nominalism, he seems to believe that perhaps an etymological analysis of the language itself will reveal the nature of the thing to him and tries himself to take apart the word, to match it to others.

world, to create or recreate in its own image. The name suggests its fundamental subjectivity: it is self-directed, self-regarding, a course of study determined by the things Bloom takes in through eyes, mouth, ears, and nose, and the chain of subjective associations and memories they trigger.

Bloom's scientific-cum-fantastic practice depends most of all on the somewhat oxymoronic practice of the thought experiment. While traditional thought experiments hew close to established natural laws in order to investigate the far away, invisible, or intangible, Bloom's thought experiments are exuberantly, openly subjective. They grow out of deeply personal free association, and assume no universal constants or restrictions, partly because Bloom does not always recall every law of science and rule of logic correctly and partly because he seems to regard such discourses as peacefully sharing the vast jurisdictional zone of the universe with other systems thought utterly separate and even contradictory: magic, religion, art. His opinion on the veracity of astrology displays this kind of discipline-harmonizing at work:

> [Astrology] seemed to him as possible of proof as of confutation and the nomenclature employed in its selenographical charts as attributable to verifiable intuition as to fallacious analogy: the lake of dreams, the sea of rains, the gulf of dews, the ocean of fecundity.
>
> *U* 17.1153-1156

Bloom's somewhat muddled hypothesis seems to be that "sublunary disasters" (*U* 17.1152) may be the result of either some sort of actual parallelism between watery-named lunar topographical features and Earth waters, or even tidal pulls exerted on Earth water by celestial bodies. The ancient magic of celestial divination here is joined to scientific astronomical and gravitational investigations to produce Bloom's theory. Neither science nor magic is given full dominance, but neither is discredited. In Bloom's thinking, the existing methodology of astrology is as likely to be grounded in submerged scientific reasoning as in fanciful belief, and the literary figure of "analogy" may express intuitive scientific understandings. Multiple disciplines and epistemological dispensations are granted provisional authority. Science and magic are partners for Bloom, tools that can be used in tandem or

alternatingly, switching to one when the other fails to supply an answer fast enough – the practical approach of a man negotiating the "velocity of modern life." Science can negotiate one step of the solution, magic another.

This tendency to consider his objects of contemplation and experimentation through multiple seemingly incompatible lenses expands the range of objects available to Bloom as questionable and investigable on scientific, experimental grounds. Bloom's ability to engage with the world based on scientific inquiry across barriers helps him overcome the crossed-out abstract god given to him by secular humanism, per Latour. Religious mysteries, for Bloom, are there to be solved. What traditional Western science and religion alike declare to be utterly unobservable and untestable, Bloomology eagerly takes up and tries, quite literally sometimes, to handle. Transubstantiation is as suitable a subject for inquiry as cat's whiskers, and such investigations are pursued by the same combination of close observation and whimsical guesswork.

Doctrinaire believers and committed secularists alike would certainly disapprove of Bloom's additive religious attitude; a "Circe" priest denounces him as "an anythingarian." The name is apt. Bloom is a belief maximalist, interested not in the most economical worldview but the most comprehensive one. The resulting paradigm is perhaps philosophically unwieldy but notably seems to produce a fluent untroubled incorporation of the supernatural into corporeal life for him. Bloom thus makes room for the supernatural amid the churn of daily life: rather than set the supernatural off as either a changeless, eternal truth outside the pull of modern "velocity" or discount it as a sort of archaic, failed science that modern science replaces, he sees it as a still-developing, worldly concern that is available to human scrutiny and still under human (and nonhuman) construction. Able to toggle among various takes on the divine, he does not have the burden of believing or disbelieving in any one system all the time.

Thrice-baptized Bloom is no regular churchgoer, but he has a notable tolerance for explanations that mix the supernatural with the natural. His is not the ecstasy of a true believer but a kind of simple ease with religion and what seems to be a levelheaded but genuine appreciation for the transformative magic of various sacraments. He brings a copywriter's professional aesthetic sense to what he sees as the Catholic church's marketing strategies. His respect for figures of national and religious veneration – "Clever idea Saint Patrick the shamrock."(*U* 5.330) – is unconventional but sincere, a leveling gaze that hails the saint as an esteemed colleague, a canvasser with a product to move. "Good idea the Latin," he thinks as he watches the priest distribute communion wafers, a compliment he will bestow again later on a floating advertisement for trousers: "Good idea that." (*U* 5.350, 8.93) From anyone else the appreciation might be wholly cynical, but here, given Bloom's established belief that even the words of a regular advertisement can approach a transportive power that resembles a numinous experience of "wonder," it is perhaps not as crass as it might seem to the devout. Advertisements and their manipulations of language are not unspiritual to Bloom. The real pleasure he takes in the rite of the Eucharist that he witnesses at the All Hallows mass in the pronouncedly sensuous "Lotus-Eaters" episode is the pleasure of thorough intellectual and sensual engagement – certainly not orthodox, but not entirely secular either. "The cold smell of sacred stone called him," we are told. There is simple sensual appeal in the church on this hot day, but the physical evocation of hardness and coldness is accompanied by the strangely abstract qualifier "sacred," which adds an element of mystery to the banal summer event of a man cooling off in a public building out of the sun (*U* 5.338). The summons may be fleshly, but its specificity suggests that matters of the body overlap with matters divine, that the ineffable may, after all, be perceptible through the ordinary senses. The sacred has a smell, particulate like any other.

The Investigative-Imaginative Mode

Bloom's radical openness to combinations of the irrational and rational, and his deliberately porous approach to multiple belief systems and modes of being produce the fantastic moments of the novel. His take is one that can be called specifically modern.[30] Bloomology opens Bloom up to not just accepting but experiencing an ever-burgeoning account of subjects and subjectivities through daily mental and bodily attempts to imitate others perfectly – a kind of affective, lived mimesis, the portrayal of which becomes increasingly "real". I call this practice the investigative-imaginative. It is a hybrid methodology that conscripts the empirical and the vatic, an attentional practice of controlled observation-based self-projection and self-annihilation like Jane Bennett's enchantment, but more concrete and routine as an experience. The practice is introduced at first as mere physical bodily adaptation. While Bloom does not seem to be looking for a single supernatural faith of his own to follow, he eagerly imagines *occupying* belief and indeed occupying deity, being supernatural, trying on the lived daily experiences of a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and their gods as they depict them. Bloom himself, as Molly tells us later, has tried out Buddha's reclining pose, as if attempting a spiritual imitation or occupation through a physical one: "[L]ook at the way hes sleeping at the foot of the bed[…]with his hand on his nose like that Indian god […]imitating him as hes always imitating everybody." (*U* 18.1197-1205) Through this methodology of "imitating everybody," however, Molly acknowledges that Bloom has arrived at something unprecedented, a hybrid Bloomological collection of secular and sacred practices: "I suppose there isnt in all creation a man with the habits he has." This singular blend of "habits" allows him to *inhabit* different modes and means by which subjects orient themselves in the world.

[30] As Pericles Lewis writes in his consideration of the subject in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, "Whether one believes (and what one believes) has gone from a given to a choice," and believers weigh religious options like savvy consumers (Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 29).

In the imaginative-investigative mode lie the ethical stakes of Bloomological study. Bloomological ethics is an ongoing research project for Bloom toward which all his investigations of the world tend. Ethics, for Bloom, is as sweeping and accretive as his preferred methods of study, an ever-growing concern that takes on bits and pieces of causes as they occur to him through encounters and exposure: gender oppression, racism, animal cruelty. The investigative-imaginative practice of self-transformation, dissolving and reworking subjectivity, allows for visceral, visionary empathy. Open as he is to experiences of the numinous, Bloom is able to disregard rules of the physical universe and his own social world as well when necessary in order to access otherwise inaccessible subjective experiences that subvert and reorder both. Moreover, it is hard for Bloom to keep the objects of his observation as objects; in the course of his examinations they relentlessly turn into subjects who make moral demands upon him.

It may seem an overstatement to term these empathetic fancies "fantastic"; there is *metaphorical* suspension of the laws of nature, or imagined suspension thereof, in Bloom's imagined transformations, but outside of "Circe," typically we read no literal shape-shifting. Moreover, they are, obviously, projections on Bloom's part. We do not have any evidence that Bloom is actually accessing any other subjectivity.[31] This is a formal and a content-based argument. However, as laid out earlier in this section's discussion of experimental narrative style, the chance of being mistaken – thinking it happened – has an equalizing function for readers. Bloom's speculative empathy usually takes the form of vivid fantastical daydreams that, incorporated without warning into the narrative,

[31] Not all of Bloom's imaginings are empathetic; there is a strain, indeed, of self-serving victim-blaming within his speculations about others' inner lives that aligns women and animals as willing sufferers: "Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it," Bloom thinks as he watches the cat, and later in All Hallows, having discovered that his waistcoat is unbuttoned, he not only dismisses the discomfort this might have caused to the women around them but even mentally accuses them of a similar refusal to squeal: "Women enjoy it. Never tell you." Plenty of us engage, in our real lives, in daydreams that are not unlike this kind of experimental empathy and, unfortunately, experimental empathy-cum-persecution.

often register with the reader as sudden waking visions, as if Bloom really has broken through into another subjectivity. It is imaginative work that borders on telepathy, a transcendence of monad subjectivity that can look supernatural.

The constant hairpin shifting of attention and viewpoint make it difficult to say whether what we are dealing with in any instance is a transcendent imaginative leap on Bloom's part or the sudden introduction of a new narrative voice, previously presumed inaccessible, actually intruding on Bloom's consciousness. The result is effectively the same: we register a possibly miraculous event within the world of the narrative.[32] Why should we read the transformations of "Circe" to be fantastic, and the transformations of Bloom in the daytime episodes as not, when they are effected by the same device: dense, fast -moving writing that rides the flickers of thought, following impulses and associations? "Circe" assigns points of view outright by labeling speakers, a practice that nevertheless confuses the borders of subjectivity in that speakers transform into each other, repeat others' words, are spoken through. *Ulysses*' waking world overruns these borders without any markers or dialogue tags. Bloom's empathetic leaps model a sort of palimpsest of subjectivities: aspects of Bloom's subjective experience layered with impressions of the others he tries to understand.

[32] The experimental style gives rise here to a readerly interpretative hesitation that looks quite Todorovian: did what seems to have been described really just happen within the narrative? Is it what we think it is? The flattening of truth value for readers of twentieth-century fiction, which Todorov says makes it impossible for such fiction to be fantastic (see above) because to readers no longer concerned with sorting real from unreal in a narrative, there is no hesitation about what is "real" and has "really happened" in the story, is here pushed far enough that it is both obtrusive in the reading experience and disconcerting. If, as Todorov would have it, we genuinely do not try to sort real from unreal or literal from symbolic any longer, then we accord all parts of the narrative equal weight and thus must accept that, for instance, an animal's attributed thought or speech – presented without qualification, never marked as imaginary – is as real as any other in the novel.

Further, regardless of whether Bloom is simply projecting or not, the fact remains that the investigative-imaginative mode makes those usually presumed mute into talkers. Speaking animals and objects make several appearances outside of Nighttown by way of Bloom's empathy. Voicing the unvoiced is political action. Bloom's impromptu studies throughout the day tend toward furthering the novel's redistribution of subjectivity, extending subjecthood to entities that start as objects of Bloom's observation and untethering subjecthood from its usual one-to-one pairing with a single distinct individual mind and allowing it to circulate. Indeed, rather than stay neatly embedded within Bloom's primary point of view, subjectivities compete. Bloom's own subjectivity jostles against the others he explores and jockeys for position.

We meet Bloom while he is hypothesizing about his pet cat's whiskers. This thought experiment progresses into an investigative-imaginative exercise, an attempt to think himself into the cat's head that begins to make the cat seem agentive and articulate. "Mr Bloom watched curiously, kindly," (*U* 4.21) we are told, a combination of observational affects that summarizes Bloom's method neatly: there is the scientific inquisitive spirit of expanding the boundaries of knowledge as an end in itself, and the warm, unobjective partisan empathy that lies beneath it. His consideration of the cat as a subject takes note of her disenfranchisement and challenges it: "They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature.[…]Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me." (*U* 4.26-29) The assessment projects human personality traits onto the animal, but it also hints at a nonhuman life of the mind. The cat's supposed cruelty and vindictiveness are presented neutrally alongside the powers of understanding that Bloom ascribes to her, as if they are all simply descriptors, neither compliments nor pejoratives. She is "Vindictive too," not "Vindictive though." He makes an attempt to analogize cat experience as human experience but retreats from it: cat is not to him as he is to tower. The confounding incongruity of cat experience with human

experience emerges in the realization that this analogy doesn't work. This yields a small positive finding in that it draws Bloom's attention to a cat's ability to jump far higher and farther, in relation to its size, than a human can – a characteristic that is essentially, irreducibly *cat*.

Subjectivities have already begun to leak and bleed, defying realist convention, from the start of Bloom's investigative-imaginative work here, which also leads to new understanding of human being. Bloom's investigative-imaginative inspection of the cat's subjectivity seems to contaminate his own, In trying to imagine being a cat, he leaves behind some of human being. On the first page of his first episode, Bloom effectively allows the cat to coopt his own much-celebrated stream of consciousness, flowing without transition from his first-person thoughts to the first-person(?) thoughts he attributes to the cat: "Just how she stalks over my writingtable. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr." (*U* 4.19-20) The beat has two parts, the investigative observation of the cat's stalking that compares it to past observations, and the imaginative or telepathic leap into the cat's mind or, depending on how naïve a reading we give it, the direct address of Bloom by the cat. The conflation of Bloom's consciousness with the cat's occurs at the linguistic level of the personal possessive pronoun itself: in the first sentence "my" refers to Bloom; in the second "my" obviously refers to the cat, though no change of point of view is indicated.

Bloom's subjectivity is thus represented from the very start as hybrid and accumulative, as well as indistinctly marked, and the first subjectivity added to it is that of an animal granted human speech. Though Bloom stays within language – a supposedly exclusive human prerogative – it does not help him avoid the slippage that occurs from one "my" to the other. It is as if the cat temporarily colonizes human language, and with it human subjectivity. The "Prr" that bookends the cat's supposed words is a distinctly unEnglish combination of consonants that avoids the more

human-user-friendly English orthography "purr" to suggest a sound a human could not make or understand.

We may not understand what the cat is "saying," but her speech is presented as deliberate, and our affective experience of the exchange is hers.[33] The cat's speech alternates with Bloom's, a narratorial pressure on his privileged subject position. The cat, in fact, speaks first, in an unpronounceable sequence of letters that recalls the spelling of the cat's earlier noise as "Prr": "Mkgnao!" The sequence is, of course, just as much a human linguistic interpretation as *mew* or *meow*, but, even though it is inevitably approximate, the singular spelling preserves a degree of autonomy from human language for the sound. The clashing letters at least preserve the sound's nonhuman aspect by signaling that it is not *for* humans, not a transliteration to help them uncomprehendingly hear the cat but an opaque, phonically unparsable unit that insists on the specificity and importance of the cat's sound in itself. There is precision and specificity in the notation, even if its purpose and meaning are obscure. The exclamation point, sometimes used to indicate linguistic components of certain human languages, lends the "word" an ambiguous connotation of phonetic notation. If we read the exclamation point simply as punctuation, then the addition of English grammar still hints in

[33] "Mkgnao!" might be mistaken for one of Joyce's "unspeakable sentences," as Jameson calls them, writ small, a premonition of the "depersonalized" language Jameson describes in "Ithaca," but this characterization of "depersonalization," while technically right, is wrong in its focus. The salient point here is not the "aphasia" (Jameson "J or P" 194) inflicted on humans by the arrangement of letters but the *phasia*, as it were, acknowledged in a newly *personalized* – or subjectivized, for those wary of rampant "personhood" – nonhuman. As for unspeakability, to declare a sentence or a word "unspeakable" is to precipitate the question, "Unspeakable for *whom*?" "Mkgnao!" is clearly not what Jameson would call language without a speaker, and the speaker should not be hard to miss; it is, however, language without a *human* speaker, unspeakable from a human point of view, and therefore harder to perceive because humans are naturally trained to privilege human utterance, and assume no speaker in the absence of a human. *Ulysses* here disrupts this training, extending the work Bloom has begun but intermittently shies from, especially as the speakers in question become objects regarded as far less humanlike than cats. The novel seems to raise the stakes with regard to impossible speakers of the increasingly unspeakable as it continues, to confer speech, life, and unforeseen understanding on first speechless animals and humans and then speechless things.

the same placeholder fashion at some sort of deliberate pattern. An impression grammar results that is perhaps unrecognizable as grammar to a human linguist, but similarly can be used to inflect certain utterances in accordance with the intent and affective state of the speaker. This interpretation presupposes that the speaker can *have* intent and affective state. Moreover, the cat's subsequent vocalizations preserve the original letters used for the utterance but add to it in a way that suggests some sort of structure modified according to pattern – "M*r*kgnao!" and then "M*r*k*r*gnao!" [emphasis added]. The sound the cat makes is generally consistent but subtly adjusted, as if to fine-tune or emphasize. There is a discernible narrative to the series, an escalation over the course of three injunctions that recalls tropes of myth and fairy tale. The cat is described as having "cried" the second interjection; the third one is "said loudly," dialogue tags that confirm her as a speaker and perhaps a frustrated one. She is owed something, if only attention, and making it known; Bloom sees her as an ethical subject.

A praxis of Bloomological ethics does not look much like a typical praxis. Bloom might be called an empathy activist, whose main form of political action is the pursuit of this mystical communion of experience-sharing, co-occupying experience. He has practical suggestions of his own for producing a just society, but they are products of his empathizing. More significantly, these concrete measures will promote further empathetic imaginative work among the populace, which is Bloom's first requirement for social change and improvement. Legislative measures may lead to justice, but justice is both theorized and manifested as an intersubjective affective condition shared among individuals. In his calmer moments Bloom gives fragments of a political program aimed at producing the good life, seeming to draw on the eclectic Bloomological archive as usual. The age-old philosophical question of "*vita bene*" is at one point given a number, "a comfortable tidysized income[…]something in the neighbourhood of £300 per annum." (*U* 16.1134-1135) This practical, tangible measure of economic, calculative justice is meant to promote "friendlier intercourse

between man and man," (*U* 16.1137) a compassionate intersubjective state of affairs. Justice for Bloom is intuitive, affectively rather than rationally perceived: it is a state of affairs that "everybody knows" makes an existence "really life." Justice requires the near-telepathy Bloom practices throughout *Ulysses*, imagining himself into other minds in a way that, translated into language on the page, is essentially indistinguishable from actual telepathic communication.

Subject Pronouns: Redistribution of Subjectivity and the Parliament of Things

One could still argue that there is a fundamental commitment to Enlightenment individuality and anthropocentrism in the Bloomological investigative-imaginative. The method and the product are the work of what most would recognize as one human subject, Leopold Bloom, who probes other subjectivities for his research but ultimately rules his utopia as an autocrat in the kingdom of his mind. However, the subject who seems to generate this phantasmagoria of miraculous and banal is neither apart from nor wholly in control of it. The undecidable intersubjective presentation of Bloomusalem in "Circe," where Bloom is quite obviously not in sole control, is in fact in keeping with Bloom's general experience of his own subjectivity and everything within it. As mentioned above, Bloom's empathetic investigations of others' subjectivities are palimpsestic, but so is his own subjectivity made of past and present versions of himself scraped off and rewritten; Bloom is never singular in his head even when he does not seem to be engaging with an embodied other.

The language of the text produces evanescent impressions of the quotidian metamorphic quality of subjectivity. Bloom flickers Proteus-like through subjectivities and epistemological dispensations within the space of minutes; the stable, self-contained Western subject is revealed as the actual fantasy here, and at the same time that fantasy's linguistic underpinnings are exposed and interrogated. English is not nuanced enough to express the endlessly fluctuating nature of subjecthood, and Bloom even trips over his own pronouns as he tries, like a tail-chasing dog, to fathom his own constructed fictiveness. Employed uncritically, English pronouns can mask the

instability of identity, though as we have seen above, subverting them through convoluted or ungrammatical use – as when Bloom switches without warning between referents for "my" and "they" as he beholds the cat – allows for a kind of marvelous psychic transcendence. He finds his pronouns clumsy to manipulate, especially in the heat of a sense memory that chops the language he uses to describe it to pieces:

> She kissed me. I was kissed.[…]Kissed, she kissed me.
> Me, and me now.
>
> *U* 8.915-916

Bloom grapples with the right way to formulate the sense impression in language here, trying it in active and passive voice, switching himself from object to subject, isolating the verb away from either pronoun. At last he turns to plumb "me" itself, lingering over its multiplicity: the first, unmodified "Me" seems to refer to the younger Bloom embracing Molly on Howth, while the present "me" must be adverbially adulterated as "me now." "Me" is, as Bloom's earlier "my" and "they" have been, an input with multiple outputs, opening onto multiple times and effectively multiple people. English speakers interpret "me" as referring in all senses immediately to the person who says it, but in this moment, "me" for Bloom implies at least one other time and one other person. Bloom's nominalist tendency to suspect that language can intuit truth would seem to lead him, here, to seek self-knowledge through the actual word used for the self, but an exploration of the word reveals multivalent correspondences.[34]

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[34] Stephen, too, finds himself in an existential quagmire at the thought of a trivial debt incurred from poet A.E.:

> Wait. Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound.
> […] But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms.
> I that sinned and prayed and fasted.

With this understanding of linguistic and narrative treachery, the Todorovian contention that the fantastic is enabled by and solely present in language, then, which seems at first to suggest a reassuring containment of the fantastic, becomes a statement not of the limitation of the magical and irrational but of their reach. Characters and readers alike learn that language is not a quiescent tool for humans. Bloom is not a human trickster silvertongue like his progenitor Odysseus. The magic-generating language of Joyce's experimental prose allows subversive competing epistemological and affective narratives to flourish in the novel. Considering human dependence on language, to say that the fantastic exists "only" in language is nearly as vacuous as saying it exists only in our heads. When our language evokes fantastic transformation and flux, we cannot be sure that we aren't reimagining ourselves. A world recognized for its fantastic mutability and the possibilities that attend it is a world that can be modified, and such a modification can be drastic to say the least, and demand the recognition of new subjects with new agendas. The stakes of the

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> A child Conmee saved from pandies.
> I, I and I. I. A.E.I.O.U.
>
> *U* 9.205-213

Even as he employs, insistently, the grammatical subject form of self-reference, Stephen is returned to his fundamental materiality by his sense of the insufficient differentiation among the words – the same word repeated, as it happens, "I, I and I" – that he must use to reference selves that feel separate: his current form; the obsessively pious teenager he was; the wronged little boy before that. Language alone seems to unite these selves, as if by a kind of linguistic brute force: call them all "I". Lacking Bloom's ease with clashing epistemological dispensations, Stephen struggles to reconcile the scientific knowledge of the constantly self-reconstituting body with stabilizing but unconvincing notions of continuous memory and Aristotelian constant organizing energy – "entelechy" – and attains a moment of liberation in experiencing himself as a thing, an object. If, rather than repress, deny, and avoid it, he privileges the material body as the location of his subjective identity, he can see his way to an escape from the abstract human societal constraint of debt, because he can argue that materially he has become wholly other in the time that has passed since he borrowed the pound. This means, of course, giving up any claim to a constant subjective identity, and Stephen seems to retreat at the end of this inner debate to a stabilizing acknowledgment of the debt, though the punning form it takes hints too at a linguistic breakdown, the flimsy *I* reduced to a mere unemployed English vowel among vowels rather than the grandly evocative word and idea that philosophers have battled over.

recognition via fantastic empathy that subjectivity is fantastically expansive are no less than a new account of the universe, a loss of the integrated human subject's primacy.

The excesses of "Circe" figure a world of reordered, de-hierarchized subjects. At the end of *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour imagines a "Parliament of Things" where "Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present, but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial," and all converge to discuss "the quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society[…]" (Latour 144) Something like this parliament of things assembles to legislate in the intersubjective and interobjective dialogue that is "Circe," though it is more radical. Latour's sketched parliament maintains speech as a human privilege, charging humans with the interpretation of "natures" and "quasi-objects". Actually imagining such a present-ing of natures and quasi-objects is, of course, a truly fantastic proposition. We see in "Circe" that such an attempt is also, in comparison to Latour's notion of things "speaking" through humans, almost uncomfortable when made literal – absurd, farcical. Things speak to and over human speakers. There is no metaphor to it; they are simply integrated into conversation with the humans.

Ultimately, a Bloomological account of the world is bigger than an account of humanity. Interdisciplinary Bloomology vies, with brief success, to be the dominant discourse of the "Circe" world, as science and culture, biology and politics, converge to build Bloomusalem. Practiced though it is by a human subject, Bloomology is not a humanist discipline, and it does not yield a humanist account of the universe; it endlessly acknowledges and subjectivizes new agents in a way that is both agglomerative and, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, molecularizing, breaking down one putatively

united subject into disparate parts. "Circe" emphasizes the agency of these nonhuman subjects[35] in relation to the humans they exist beside and within.

The course of "Circe," in fact, is determined by an intersubjective web of human and nonhuman agents. Bloom is drawn into the Nighttown misadventure through his paternal pursuit of Stephen, but he is also pulled along by the pursuit of an actual possession – his inherited lucky potato, a marker of his residual animism, that Zoe the prostitute discovers while groping at his crotch. Her initial impression that the potato is some sort of tumor is in a sense not far off, considering the economy of subjectivity that circulates between Bloom and his objects. Riding in Bloom's pocket all day, connected to him by the lore of blood and history and passed on from his mother, the potato transcends the boundary of Bloom's person here, and indeed he begs for it back as if it is still part of him. The excised potato remains an intimate part of Bloom even in Zoe's keeping. There is a sensual game of sadomasochism in the dispute over the potato; Zoe "regards [the potato] and Bloom with dumb moist lips" before putting it into her own pocket as if completing some kind of proxy intercourse-by-tuber.

Further, the potato seems to communicate some of its own overdetermined historical and affective resonance to English Zoe after she co-opts it from Jewish-Irish Bloom, and Bloom's utopian daydreams and mythologized heritage suddenly break in on the tawdry scene. The activation

[35]I continue to use the word "subject" despite the fact that it may seem like a misnomer, putting us back in the realm of monad subjectivity and the Enlightenment conception of individuality; undoubtedly Deleuze and Guattari would recoil from my use of the word in respect to their work on molecularization and packs. What I am arguing, however, is for a wider conception of the word "subjectivity" ; it need not be associated only with traditional Western views of it. "Subject" in *Ulysses* refers to an entity that evidences intention and some sort of affective life, but such an entity may be fluid and its boundaries change; it is a consciousness regularly being augmented and appended, having to rediscover itself. I am primarily concerned with the way that human subjects with ossified notions of human subjectivity deal with such augmentations and appendages, and so it makes sense to start from a point of view that looks for subjectivities rather than otherwise.

of the potato as an agent touches off an associative chain of hallucinatory transformations. The tableau of kohl-eyed Zoe with the potato, set to "oriental music," fades into a vision of Eastern mountains and odalisques, and Zoe lapses into Hebrew. Bloom addresses the potato as an agent, opening onto a sententious indictment of English oppression in collusion with, of all things, plants. Moralizing Bloom, magically outfitted in the guise of a proletarian rabble-rouser at Zoe's mere sarcastic suggestion that he "make a stump speech," outlines one surprising pathway of Irish suffering, and human suffering generally:

> Mankind is incorrigible. Sir Walter Ralegh [sic] brought from the new world that potato and that weed, the one a killer of pestilence by absorption, the other a poisoner of the ear, eye, heart, memory, will, understanding, all. That is to say he brought the poison a hundred years before another person whose name I forget brought the food. Suicide. Lies. All our habits. Why, look at our public life!
>
> *U* 15.1354-1361

So exercised is Bloom over the two nonhuman, presumed-non-sentients that he gives little attention to the human agents involved in this conspiratorial web of biological and psychological ruin, wherein the botanical world uses the English project of colonization and exploitation as its own self-propagating tool. Respectively withheld from the hungry and provided to the dissipated, these two biological agents infiltrate public and individual consciousness. Raleigh and the "person" Bloom cannot remember play lackeys to blighted potato and tobacco, which are characterized like human criminals: a killer, a poisoner, with their own morally unfathomable alien subjective drives like the vindictive cat.

Humans in this account are disturbingly vulnerable to physical and metaphysical invasion and interference, porous envelopes with ingresses at the receptive organs and a cluster of other faculties that, combined, constitute the seat of Western subjectivity and individuality as conventionally conceived and articulated: "heart, memory, will, understanding." The potato's subjective orientation is particularly complex – morally ambivalent, it is both contaminant and

purgative. Its status as a staple crop means starvation for millions when it is blighted; in its absence it destroys body and mind. On the other hand, though it is a "killer" in this sense, the "killer" in Bloom's speech refers to the potato in terms of "pestilence," which it supposedly kills by "absorption," reaching into tainted bodies to draw it out and take it on, as if in a kind of sacrifice-by-substitution. Significantly, Bloom's metaphysical sentiment about humanity's "incorrigible" prospects arises in the context of humans' interactions with two particular *things*, and only indirectly with each other. The evidence of incorrigibility is here not direct human-to-human cruelty but a kind of improper, careless mind-and-body engagement with things. A rethinking of "public life," a chance at corrigibility, must address things as agents.

The absence of the protective potato has an effect that seems to confirm the reality of it as an animate and magical subjective agent, a piece of Bloom without which Bloom is altered and his agency compromised. This is clear when he wanders into Bella Cohen's brothel, lamenting "I should not have parted with my talisman," when Bella's own talismanic objects tyrannize him. Bloom is in unfriendly company among Bella and her things, but whose malice it really is remains hard to determine; "Bella's" subjectivity circulates among them. Her fan strikes first. The parenthetical descriptions of action describe the fan's movements as if they are self-propelled, and make it the dynamic actor around the inert Bella, variously resting "against her left eardrop" and at her waist as if she is a stage set.

Ultimately it is the simpering fan to which Bloom pledges subservience, not to Bella directly, a capitulation that sets him up for the more violent domination of Bella's menacing "buskined hoof," which threatens – independent of Bella – to kick him. It appears to be by means of the hoof that Bella transforms into Bello, the brutal male ringmaster: the Bella-Bello transformation occurs after Bloom has obliged by tying the laces of the "hoof," securing it to Bella-Bello. Even biological

sex, it seems, is thus tied – literally, in this case – to things, particularly personal things, a term that suggests the irreducible compound nature that these things-held-close acquire. Bloom's murmurs as he laces the transformative shoe evidence a longstanding belief in this potential for great change to be wrought even by the mere rearrangement of personal things, a nearly obsessive-compulsive anxiety: "Not to lace the wrong eyelet as I did on the night of the bazaar dance. Bad luck. Hook in the wrong tache of her[…]That night she met…" (*U* 15.2826-2828) In this magical thinking Bloom appears to attribute the infidelity that exacerbates his marital estrangement to one instance of carelessness with his wife's shoe.

The subjectivizing power of the thing here recalls Orlando's discovery about the transformative power of clothing but also diverges from it: whereas clothing is, at least according to *Orlando*'s narrator, the outer manifestation of some sort of inner truth, clothing and the other things held close to the body that feature in "Circe" seem to hold and convey some of that supposedly inner truth of identity to the wearer, and also to siphon off parts of that identity, effecting explicit biological changes on the physical body. Further, where in *Orlando* clothing changes correspond to changes in the recognizable human concern of sexual identity, the logic of the changes effected by the shoes of *Ulysses* remains a logic *of* things. These things affect and intersect with human organization of sexuality and bios, but remain unmappably themselves in the process. A tied shoe here makes Bella into Bello, a tied shoe there makes Molly unfaithful, but the nature and consistency of the correlations are unclear: these shoes do not become allegorically readable. They have intervening agendas of their own, and do not simply parallel something located within humans as if hermetically sealed against tampering. Humans must negotiate with the quasi-object thing as its literal self.

Material Utopias: Nonhuman Democracy and Politics

In the wake of "Circe" the narrative seems to fully abandon any assumption of human primacy, as we discover when the dust of the nighttime rovings fully settles with Bloom's "Ithaca" *nostos*. Jameson has called the "Ithaca" episode "post-narrative," but it seems rather to be a narrative that has simply ceased pretense to being a narrative of (only) human subjects. Things play a determinative role in this homecoming, effectively making Bloom a stranger in his own house: as he approaches the door of 7 Eccles Street, he "[inserts] his hand mechanically into the back pocket of his trousers to obtain his latchkey," only to discover that it is not there and is in fact in the same pocket of the trousers he wore the day before. (*U* 17.72-73) Bloom himself is effectively narrated as an object here, whose interior subjective world matters less than the changing contours of his physicality, which includes the clothes he wears from day to day. Because he has altered himself physically, however superficially, from who he was a day ago, he changes from a homecoming breadwinner to a home invader.

The action of the break-in is described in an almost parodically technical and exhaustive way that attends most to the sheer physics at work, in contrast to previous episodes that privilege states of mind (primarily Bloom's or Stephen's) and ignore or under-describe action to the point that it must be inferred and pieced together based on the fragmented thoughts and sense impressions of the characters. Here Bloom himself is treated as merely an object in motion. The narrative evaluation of his progress is pointedly specific in its description of what happens to Bloom's physical self but not in its description of Bloom's state of mind; it says no more about Bloom than one can comfortably say about, for instance, an object rolling down an incline without assigning anthropomorphizing traits to it. The exact arrangement of the assemblage that is his body parts and his clothing receives attention that is linguistically jarring:

Resting his feet on the dwarf wall, he[…]compressed his hat on his head[…]lowered his body gradually by its length of five feet nine inches and a half to within two feet ten inches of the

area pavement and allowed his body to move freely in space by separating himself from the railings and crouching in preparation for the impact of the fall.

U 17.84-89

This is a narrative of forces acting on things, a genre usually left to physicists. Bloom lowers "his body," not the more idiomatic "himself," and allows "his body," with its precise "length" – a word, replacing the more conventional "height," that suggests measuring a passive recumbent object – and "allowed his body" to follow the pull of gravity. Treated in these terms, "body" seems to shift in meaning from referring to a human being's sensate, expressive physical form to the more opaque sense of "bodies" used in the language of classical physics when it considers objects: bodies "in space." Object-like, Bloom regains "equilibrium," makes his way inside "by the exertion of force at [the door's] freely moving flange and by leverage of the first kind applied at its fulcrum," and lights a match "by friction." (*U* 17.101-105) Pain, surprise, relief – none of these are suggested for Bloom any more than they are for the door or the match; a kind of cold physical representative democracy prevails in the narrative of the break-in.

Democracy, indeed, is in this episode not a noble idea held in the minds of human subjects but a seemingly physical principle best expressed by ever-changing, ever-redistributing water, whose "democratic equality and constancy," we learn in "Ithaca," Bloom admires. The word "democratic" appears nowhere else in the novel but here, as a literal expression of utopic justice. Democracy is thus imagined within human life in a way that does not organize subjectivity as Bloom himself and other proponents of democracy and equality do. It is located in a substance both prevalent and familiar as anything known to humans, and yet riddlingly paradoxical: life-giving and -destroying, endlessly moving and nonliving, solid-liquid-gas. Bloom's homage to water – spanning, in keeping with Bloomological practice, geography, zoology, hydraulics technology, chemistry, historical anecdote, and folk beliefs about "healing virtues" – draws to a close with a remark on water's

"ubiquity, constituting 90 percent of the human body," a slightly exaggerated biological fact followed immediately by a jump to the poetic and fanciful, "stagnant pools in the waning moon."

The meditation on human chemical makeup suggests that humans are made, quite literally, of democratic stuff, pulled on a cellular level toward democracy. This democratic pull is, however, not oriented to the scale of the human individual as monadically conceived. Something within human bodies is fundamentally, materially democratic, "seeking its own level" not only with other watery humans but with the still "lagoons and highland tarns," the "violence" of "waterspouts, Artesian wells, eruptions[…]whirlpools, maelstroms, inundations, deluges, cloudbursts," the "electric power stations, bleachworks, tanneries, scutchmills," the "submarine fauna and flora" that constitute "numerically, if not literally, the inhabitants of the globe," and that globe. (*U* 17.186-225). This drive toward some sort of even distribution aligns humans with meteorological forces, geological formations, human-created machines, other animals, and plants is physical, empirically derived, but also metaphysical, given the scientific fact's close juxtaposition with a superstitious invocation of the waning moon's baleful influence on the tidally vulnerable Earth. In water Bloom finds a magically and scientifically determined common denominator for the known world. That denominator opens up a vast intersubjective community in which it would seem that all forces and entities of the scientifically- and supernaturally-known world are present and accounted for. Understood as the same substance, however, they are radically equalized in a way that erases anything Enlightenment humanism would recognize as subjectivity.

Chapter Two

No Gist of It: Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, "Echo's Bones," and Allegory-Resistant Magic

Flann O'Brien, writing to acquaintance and fellow writer William Saroyan in early 1940 just after finishing *The Third Policeman*, supplies an authorial explanation for the text that is about as global and cosmically thoroughgoing as possible: the familiar but uncanny world through which the novel's nameless narrator wanders is in fact "a sort of hell which he earned for the killing"[1] of his elderly neighbor at the beginning of the novel. This particular excerpt from O'Brien's correspondence is much-cited in critical work on *The Third Policeman*, often by way of summarizing the novel's plot, and is included as a publisher's afterword in most available editions of the text, as if it is a necessarily explanatory epilogue. It is perhaps fitting that interpretations of a work so often characterized as a proto- or early example of postmodern fiction should turn so much upon a paratextual element, and an authorial commentary at that, never meant to be part of the text as far as the author himself was concerned. O'Brien, for all his use of faux-footnotes, seems to be out-metafictioned here, his work glossed by one superseding, unifying footnote. Critics tend to allow O'Brien's words to assert final interpretative authority over the text, enabling an interpretation that in turn draws a unifying moral from the anarchic fantastic events of the novel: an iniquitous life has condemned the protagonist to a spirit dimension of eternal, magical torment. We are then in a world much like that theorized by religion and superstition, including O'Brien's own Catholicism. Reality includes events that defy the natural order, and humanity serves as a focal point for these

[1] Brian O'Nolan, letter to William Saroyan, qtd. *The Third Policeman*, 2nd ed., ed. Denis Donoghue appendix (Champaigne: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), 200. Hereafter, quotations from Flann O'Brien's (Brian O'Nolan) *The Third Policeman* refer to this edition and are cited with page numbers in-text as *TP*.

interruptions of the natural order, proving that humans occupy a special, supernaturally determined place within it. Human behavior matters, and nature itself will be disrupted to redress wrongs.

This resounding moral conclusion perhaps accounts for the frequency with which critical work on The Third Policeman produces global allegorical readings that offer cohesive keys, impressing the novel's wayward magics into the service of one metatextual argument or another. The novel's extensive fantastic content is frequently neutralized in critical work as a mere rhetorical strategy, as when critic M. Keith Booker explains it by way of Mikhail Bhaktin's assertion that fantastic narrative is "'a way to test and explore ideas, not a positive embodiment of truth but a mode for truth, searching after truth, provoking it, and most important, *testing* it.'"[2] In this chapter, however, I argue against losing sight of the fantastic events of *The Third Policeman* by unifying them under any allegorical or thematic schema in this way. By thematic schema, I mean "world-building" theorizing of the kind popular in science fiction and fantasy fandoms, that sets out to map the logic and "rules" of a given fantastic landscape. Exegeses of *Policeman*'s world have identified it variously as a Christian hell, an alternative universe governed by the crackpot science of a fictional philosopher, and the fairy realm of Irish folklore.

Such readings come at the expense of honoring the novel's weirdness, demystifying its profoundly strange and fanciful events. Todorov writes that a work is not truly fantastic if it can be reduced to allegory; fantastic events in a narrative must be "irreducible" to allegorical readings.[3] I argue here that *The Third Policeman*'s fantastic elements are irreducible in just this way. Moreover, in suggesting but ultimately resisting various allegorical readings pertaining to the (super)nature of

[2] M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 46.
[3] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 166.

reality and its implications for human beings, this fantastic narrative makes human life not more cosmically significant but less. Where supernatural events might be read to suggest that human existence and action has lasting significance, the notion of a special, supernaturally ordained place for humans in the cosmos is instead undermined, not exalted, by the possibility of supernatural events. Magic gives less meaning to human life, not more. Morally speaking, I argue that this conclusion supports the agentive role and necessity of recognition Jane Bennett sees for the nonhumans that "enchanted materialism" recognizes, but also complicates and problematizes the edifying claims Bennett makes for enchanted materialism as a human attentional practice.

O'Brien's human-unfriendly fantastic aligns *Policeman* with his contemporary and compatriot Samuel Beckett's early fiction. In their adventures, Beckett's Belacqua and his *Molloy* trilogy successors are overwhelmed and literally torn to pieces by an enchanted nonhuman environment far more animate than they. I focus here on Beckett's most fantastic work, the long-unpublished story "Echo's Bones." Written as a last-minute coda to his 1934 short story collection *More Pricks Than Kicks*, the story was rejected by his Chatto & Windus editor Charles Prentice, who found its "nightmare" aesthetic altogether too magically real: "just too terribly persuasive."[4] A rejection of *Policeman* would, in similar slightly embarrassed tones, advise O'Brien to "become less fantastic."[5] The reaction to both pieces seems to have been that this was a step too far, that previous absurdity, transgression, and unnaturalism in their work was all very well, but lines must be drawn so as not to disturb or frustrate the public too much. Both ended up deferred for decades. Delayed around the same time as *Policeman*, which would be published in 1967, a year after O'Brien's death, "Echo's

[4] Charles Prentice, qtd. *Echo's Bones*, ed. Mark Nixon (New York: Grove Press, 2014), xii. Hereafter, quotations from Samuel Beckett's "Echo's Bones" refer to this edition and are cited with page numbers in-text as *EB*.
[5] Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction: The Story-teller's Book-Web* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), 152.

Bones" waited in Dartmouth College's archives until 2014, when it was released as a stand-alone volume.

"Echo's Bones" and *Policeman* thus make for good companions in this moment of the twentieth-century fantastic. Written within the era of late modernism, both failed to resonate with a market-conscious publishing world but began to attract interest long afterward. Both authors are the subject of some debate as to where they belong in the modernist/postmodernist dichotomy. O'Brien's designation in this regard has in fact been a central preoccupation of much of the criticism on him.[6] Thus, they serve here as transitional figures between the works in this dissertation that are typically classed as "modernist" and those that are described as "postmodernist". My interest is in

[6] The argument of Keith Hopper's book-length study, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Postmodernist*, is economically encapsulated in the book's title: O'Brien is identified as an early postmodernist writer and yet linked explicitly to James Joyce in the adaptation of the name of one of the most famous titles typically associated with modernist literary production. Trying to taxonomize or create taxonomy for O'Brien along, variously, narratological, generic, formal, and historical lines has led critics to set his works apart from thenovel tradition by describing them as "anti-novels," "metafictions," "unnatural narratives," Menippean satires, science fiction, and fantasies (Booker, Deane, Hopper, Nolan, Richardson, Whybrow; see below) by variously identifying their chief concerns as epistemological or ontological.
Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
M. Keith Booker (cf. note 2)
Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Author as a Young Post-Modernist*, 2nd ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009).
Patrick Nolan, "Flann, Fantasy and Science Fiction: O'Brien's Surprising Synthesis," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (2011): 178-190.
Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2015).
Samuel Whybrow, "Flann O'Brien's Science Fiction: An 'Illusion of Progression' in *The Third Policeman,*" in *"Is It About a Bicycle?": Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).

delineating continuous developments among these works, not in taxonomizing them according to period.[7]

I turn to "Echo's Bones" in particular among Beckett's works because it seems to represent something of a departure for Beckett, or at least to contain a number of elements usually not emphasized in consideration of Beckett's other works. These elements emerge strikingly through the lens of *Policeman*. "Echo's Bones" takes place, like *Policeman*, in an incongruous hybrid landscape of inextricable fairy tale and what Seamus Deane calls "squalid realism":[8] protagonist Belacqua comes back from the dead to live again in all his revolting effluvia, and a giant takes Belacqua to his treehouse on a flying ostrich, where he complains about venereal disease and asks Belacqua to sleep with his wife. This marriage of the fantastic with the earthy concrete stands in contrast to the minimalistic, vaguely sketched spaces in which the events of the later *Molloy* trilogy unfold, and the near-bare stylization of the Beckett stage to come. In exploring this conjunction of the dirty and naturalistic with the fanciful, I build on Rubin Rabinovitz's contention that Beckett's work here is both still concerned with depicting the real – albeit in a radically new way – and also takes a "critical view of material reality," reconsidering aspects of material experience that are taken for granted as "reality."[9] While *Policeman* is a novel and "Echo's Bones" a stray short story, I choose to treat

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[7] In the pantheon of literary influence, O'Brien points in two directions relevant to this dissertation: Joyce evidently weighs heavily upon him (Deane), but he is also cited as an influence by Salman Rushdie (noted in Booker), whose work I take up in the next chapter. Rushdie is also clearly influenced by Joyce, to the point of including winking references to *Ulysses* in The Satanic Verses, though with an irreverence and superficiality that perhaps O'Brien, who takes a rather cheap shot at Joyce by casting him as a devout Catholic would-be Jesuit in his final novel, would have appreciated.

[8] I agree with Seamus Deane's bipartite description of O'Brien's work, though I disagree that the two remain distinct, with the fairy tale "pure" and the realism "squalid"; they are, to my reading, thoroughly intermixed, the banal and meaningless with the magical, as I go on to argue. Deane, 196.

[9] Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7-10. Rabinovitz writes that the mimetic project going on here is focused on reproducing Belacqua's thoughts rather than external actions: the narrator gives voice to his conscious thoughts while the unconscious is represented by "recurring details." (Rabinovitz, 43) Rabinovitz argues that

"Echo's Bones" as the belated conclusion to *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and to consider the whole collection in the sense that Rabinovitz does, as "more like an episodic novel"[10] in which "Echo's Bones" is "an integral part."[11] Like *Policeman*, itself episodic and much in keeping with the picaresque aesthetic of loose amalgamation and accumulation, it provides a fantastic conclusion that, rather than resolve or explain the foregoing events, complicates them with further non sequiturs.

As in *Policeman*, the human individuals of "Echo's Bones," if such they are to begin with, face inexorable material disintegration over their lives and then in afterlives that take place in a warped version of their own familiar, mud-splashed rural worlds. Both novels evoke the familiar cosmic frame of a mortal coil and a hell where sinful mortals persist and suffer after death, but their hells are far from Dantean logic: rather than suffer by means consistent with the sins they have committed as codified in a hierarchized list, humans draw inscrutable punishment upon themselves for the inscrutable offense of their "definite individual existence." (EB) In Beckett obscure powers bat Belacqua helplessly between death and life, changing natural rules. In O'Brien, even the ability of humans to orchestrate these fantastic powers undermines human individuality, and human disintegration is indistinguishable from human immortality. The supernatural persistence of human consciousness beyond physical death only reveals that consciousness as fragmented and illusory. In

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even though these are not concrete actions that "occur in the world," they in no way suggest an "inferior" level of reality. (Rabinovitz 8) I would go even beyond this and argue that of course thoughts, conscious and unconscious, "occur in the world," and that the notion of an external or world ultimately does not hold up. I explore a similar idea in relation to Joyce and Woolf in my first chapter, as well as in my paper "Between the (Head)Lines".

[10] Rabinovitz, 36.

[11] Rabinovitz, 61. John Pilling argues, to the contrary, that *Pricks* is "not quite a novel"; I contend that it is a novel in the same model as *The Third Policeman*, following a more or less constant character whose memory wafts in and out through a series of adventures that seem only tangentially related and could be read as stand-alone stories. However, taken in the aggregate, these stories reveal commonalities that would otherwise be missed if they were considered in isolation.
John Pilling, "Beckett's English Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.

their use of fantastic elements to break down the human, O'Brien and Beckett continue to develop the post-humanist tendency of the twentieth-century fantastic, though O'Brien's version, in keeping with a trickster ethos that runs through all his work, is more paradoxical, depicting humans who at some points appear to wield preternatural powers but are effectively less empowered, and less agentive, as a result.

I also contend that the literary and philosophical stakes of O'Brien's fantastic work are on the order of those of Beckett's fiction. I submit that O'Brien's alleged "comic" narrative play with a topsy-turvy hell is closer to Beckett's wry depictions of existential despair and absurdity than it appears, a similarity easiest to see in the comparison with "Echo's Bones". Beckett's critics tend to credit him with more gravitas, as well as granting him valences and ambiguities that pat allegorical interpretations of *Policeman* deny to O'Brien. O'Brien is painted as a punning parabolist, a provincial yarn-spinner, traits that, it is implied, make him a lesser author than he might have been. His work suggests a potential that might have been fulfilled had he not succumbed to alcoholism and journalism. Rolf Breuer concludes an essay on O'Brien and Beckett with a typically asymmetrical characterization of the two, concluding that their common interest in "epistemological scepticism" served O'Brien as a springboard for "quirky humour and absurd contents" while Beckett adapted this mode of uncertain narrative "to suit his more 'existentialist' concerns."[12]

Whether in scare quotes or out, "existentialist" is a term frequently applied to Beckett, linking him to mid-century philosophical inquiry, while O'Brien is to some degree dismissed as a mere wit without real thematic or aesthetic significance, a talent whose ambitions shrank as his liver unfortunately grew. Critical wisdom has held that his dissipation, literary and personal, came as a

[12] Rolf Breuer, "Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett," *Irish University Review* 37, no. 2 (Autumn-Winter 2007), 350.

result of the successful light satirical newspaper column that usurped his time; his legacy is to be relegated to an assortment of jokes delivered via various narrative genres.[13] These perceptions of O'Brien and his work have, I argue, unduly colored readings of *The Third Policeman* and led to reductive interpretations that do not consider its fantastic aspects as closely as they deserve. Hugh Kenner, while granting O'Brien "one serious book" in *The Third Policeman*, describes the novel in terms that acknowledge the alien undecidability of its landscape but still remain committed to a more straightforward hell narrative: *Policeman* is set in "a *comic* hell – devilless and Godless." (Emphasis in the original.)[14] What can it mean, though, for a "hell" to be comic, or for a hell to exist in the absence of a devil or a god? Why, in fact, stay bound by O'Brien's merely paratextual gloss of the setting as a moralistic "hell" at all? This chapter explores the ways in which *The Third Policeman*'s fantastic exceeds the hell allegory, just as the afterlife narrative in "Echo's Bones," despite Belacqua's name and the supposed "injustice" of his "individual existence" (EB) is no Dantean depiction of divine retribution.

Previous O'Brien critics have argued against allegorical interpretations of *Policeman*, but often these arguments still present highly schematic accounts of the text that do not seem much different from allegorical readings in that they provide a kind of key or code whereby every element of the plot is resolvable to a larger, cohesive picture or thesis.[15] More nuanced considerations of the

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[13] See Deane, Hugh Kenner (*A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (cf. note 14), Declan Kiberd (*The Irish Writer and the World*, see below).
Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[14] Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 258.
[15] Hopper writes that *Policeman* is "an indeterminate allegory of a relative world that resists any absolute interpretation," which raises the question of what an "indeterminate allegory" is; "allegory" does not seem to be the appropriate word. Moreover, despite Hopper's disputation of some of the more outré allegory theories projected onto the novel, he himself argues that "metafictionally, the work is a journey to discover the borderland between reality and fiction," and devotes much time and space to meticulously glossing each fantastic event as representing some aspect of the process of writing: authorial control and the subversion thereof, creativity, fictionality. (The narrator's unimaginative vision for omnium is a comment on the limits of writerly invention, etc.), Likewise,

unresolvable strangeness of O'Brien's work have attended primarily to the more conspicuously experimental, probably because more conspicuously metafictional, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Brian Richardson includes the 1939 *At Swim-Two-Birds* among the texts he discusses in *Unnatural Narratives*, and thus by implication makes a claim at least for this novel's "irreducibility"[16] – a term he shares with Todorov apparently by coincidence – to allegory. In a stipulation reminiscent of Todorov's rubric for fantastic narrative, Richardson writes that "unnatural narratives," which he defines as "antimimetic" or deliberately non-naturalistic, necessarily cannot be resolved as allegories; a work like *Pilgrim's Progress* may have some antimimetic features but fails the "unnatural" test because it is neatly interpreted allegorically. Unnatural narratives must be read with an eye toward "hints of allegory [and] thematic associations" but these elements must not be "reduce[d…]to one or two of these other aspects in an effort to place the entire work safely within a single totalizing interpretation."[17]

At Swim-Two-Birds qualifies for Richardson as unnatural because of its "frame-breaking" strategy of "metalepsis", wherein layers of fictionality are deployed: in this case, a fictional novelist within the novel creates characters who interact across the layers their equally fictional author.[18] Though many of the other texts Richardson treats as examples of unnatural narrative are classified as unnatural in part because they contain fantastic elements, he does not mention *The Third Policeman*'s fantastic plot. I, however, find O'Brien's metafictional play in *At Swim* to be a less compelling aspect of his "unnaturalness" as Richardson defines it. As Richardson himself notes, this

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while Booker argues that the novel's theme is epistemological indeterminacy, he nonetheless produces a quite definitive account of the way that each bizarre episode shores up this thesis, in order to claim overall that the novel is a Menippean satire about " a reality that is ultimately unknowable," a conclusion that would seem to shut down any further, more detailed discussion of the fantastic events in the novel.

[16] Richardson, 20.

[17] Richardson, 20-21.

[18] Richardson, 69.

inter-fictional strife, as old as Cervantes as least, is always contained by the limits of the novel, and "the actual O'Brien" remains the creator and orchestrator of all, at no real risk from insubordinate characters. This chapter extends Richardson's start on O'Brien's unnatural-ism by turning to the allegorically irreducible fantastic events of *The Third Policeman*.

Further, *Policeman* and the critical history that has dogged it as a result of O'Brien's explanatory letter to Saroyan have given rise to a situation that approaches a real-world version of the interfictional rebellions that happen only between covers in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. As I explain above, interpretations of *Policeman*'s fantastic have been guided and misguided by other intersecting texts and, arguably, characters. Among these is of course the fateful letter that supplies the hell interpretation, a letter written to an American fellow writer and signed "Brian O'Nolan," the English version of O'Brien's real name, Brian Ó Nualláin. This ostensibly "real" (but Anglicized) voice of the author comments on the novel that will be published, as all of his novels were, under the Flann O'Brien nom de plume. *Policeman* criticism has also drawn heavily on O'Brien's years of newspaper columns from the *Irish Times*, humorous meditations written in the distinct voice and persona of "Myles na gCopaleen," or "Myles of the Ponies," a multilingual raconteur by turns mocking and identifying with "The Plain People of Ireland" and commenting with dry cynical wit on current events, culture, and even the other contents of the newspaper. Critical use of the na gCopaleen material often conflates Myles and his various stances with Nolan with O'Brien, a move that seems particularly risky given na gCopaleen's impish, tricksy attitude to readers at least of his English-language columns, many or most of which readers were presumably unable to know what na gCopaleen said about things in his Irish and Latin columns.[19]

[19] Further, the Myles voice is variable; as Declan Kiberd notes, there are the apparently contradictory poles of Myles the satirist and Myles the sellout "fool" pandering to stage-Irish stereotypes. (Kiberd, 38.) *Cruiskeen Lawn* also shows off Myles the bitter, disappointed writer; there is Myles the Sterne-

Certainly, from technological sublimity to James Joyce, the columns take up a number of concerns that surface in O'Brien's fiction as well. However, while the na gCopaleen view of the atomic age is interesting in light of *Policeman*'s atomic theory, it seems to me a mistake to take it on faith as O'Nolan's view, O'Brien's, or the novel's narrator's. With Brian O'Nolan long dead, the various writing personae he created seem to have acquired their own autonomous lobbying power in the critical discourse on their creator's work: the mischievous na gCopaleen character is eager to tell pattern-seeking critics what to make of the O'Brien oeuvre, while the O'Nolan letter-writer tries to simplify things, perhaps for American readers in general – O'Nolan spoke derisively of American critical adulation for Joyce.

The result is not quite the chaos of violence and intrigue that ensues in *At Swim*, but it certainly seems likely that it would have amused the man who once conducted an ongoing controversy by himself in the *Times* letters to the editor, assailing and bolstering his own work under a directory's worth of false names.[20] The personae that were mere puppets for the author have a kind of unarguable life in the critical discourse, especially when it comes to interpreting *Policeman*'s befuddling, irreducible magic; these strangely agentive inventions lend the text an extratextual layer of enchantment consistent with the intratextual frame-breaking Richardson describes. Actual commentators even begin to sound a little like the philosopher De Selby and the warring De Selby scholars of *Policeman*'s footnotes, laying out elaborate allegorical keys and calling upon dubious sources to back them, as in the notable case of Charles Kemnitz, who produces a clever but limiting just-so reading of the novel as an atomic bomb allegory. In one memorable footnote, Kemnitz cites thirdhand the word of O'Brien's friend Niall Sheridan via an anecdote from another scholar on the

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like narrator of obsessive preoccupations and bizarre inventions; the list of personae could undoubtedly be extended.

[20] Taaffe, Carol. "Cruiskeen's comic genius," *Irish Times* (Dublin), April 1, 2006.

man's interest in science. Kemnitz's contact adds that he has "no reason to believe [Sheridan] was codding [him]," but allows that it is possible.[21]

Indeed, paratextual materials for *Policeman* and also *Echo's Bones* even suggest one final confounding frame-breaking explanation for their magic, an anticlimactically practical one: freeing themselves from the confines of natural law in their plotting made it possible for both writers to write more. Belacqua's resurrection from the dead in "Echo's Bones" is the necessary result of Beckett's author asking Beckett for another story to fill out *More Pricks Than Kicks* and help it sell better. With Belacqua killed off in "Yellow" and buried in "Draff," Beckett had no choice but to work a miracle in order to extend the narrative. O'Brien, for his part, claims in the letter to Saroyan that he's trying to be both funny and "new" in telling the story from a dead man's point of view, and emphasizes the new comic and literary possibilities that suspending natural law opens for him: "When you are writing about the world of the dead – and the damned – where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks."[22] My point here is not at all to suggest that we trust the authors for interpretation, but to point out these pragmatic, metatextual explanations for the text's fantastic occurrences as yet more in addition to the conflicting, only partial explanations proliferated within the text, which I consider in this chapter.

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[21] Charles Kemnitz, "Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions: A Relativistic Reading of *The Third Policeman*," *Irish University Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1985), 56-57 fn 3.
Keith Hopper, author of the only single-author critical book entirely devoted to *Policeman* that I know of, disputes Kemnitz's reading – for one thing, *Policeman* was written nearly a decade before the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan – but while Hopper argues against Kemnitz that *Policeman* sets in motion an "intertextual clash of discourses" that complicate allegorical reading, Hopper nonetheless offers his own to some degree totalizing reading of the content that Kemnitz argues pertains to the Theory of Relativity and the atomic bomb. Per Hopper, these elements recall Irish "voyage mythology" more than science. (Hopper, 38.) This seems to me to be as uneasy a fit for *Policeman*'s fantastic as Einsteinian physics.
[22] O'Nolan, letter to William Saroyan in O'Brien introduction.

If their authors may have had somewhat banal motives to make the texts fantastic, the fantastic is depicted as a sometimes-banal experience for the characters as well. The lack of meaningful explanation that the fantastic events have for humans, and human insignificance in an enchanted world, is hinted first by the general indifference of the characters to their increasingly extraordinary surroundings. Even before unsatisfying in-text explanations are offered, the characters frequently evidence remarkably little interest in trying to explain instances of the fantastic, even those that involve them directly. Sometimes they even seem unaware that anything out of the ordinary has taken place, and the reader is given hardly any more indication. Existence continues beyond physical death with hardly a broadcasting blip.

For the *Policeman* narrator, the moment of putative death and immediately ensuing afterlife registers in the narration as "some change which came upon me or upon the room," "indescribably subtle," and simply beyond the perception of the narrator's sensorium: "my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation." (*TP* 23) The "change" is not a moment of metaphysical transcendence for the narrator, as his consciousness survives death. Nor does this immortality come with any intimation of meaning or greater understanding. Indeed, one could even argue that the "change" here is undercut in its absoluteness since it is not the only point at which the narrator claims to have undergone a vague but transformative event. A few hours later in narrative time he says "Something strange then happened to me suddenly[…]an unaccountable excitement took complete possession of me. There was nothing to see and no change of any kind had come upon the scene to explain what was taking place inside me." (*TP* 52) The narrator's account of his unremarkable life up to the events of the story is marked with mysterious cutoff points as well, as when he says that after years of isolation and exploitation by John Divney, "something very unusual happened to change all this," (*TP* 12-13) by which he means that he and Divney conspired to

commit the murder that may also be regarded as a starting place and inciting incident for the narrator's fantastic journey.

Ordinary People: Humans and the Unassimilable Fantastic

Though Beckett's and O'Brien's characters inhabit material realities that have shifted dramatically, they are prevented by the immediately at-hand, material effects of those shifts from consciously registering that they now lead enchanted lives, if "lives" is the right word. Resurrection does not interfere with their immediate experiences of their bodies. They fail to notice or grapple with the fact that these experiences should be impossible and hence violate natural law by their very continuity: after death human bodies by definition do not sense, move, or engage with the world, and a human body that does this is in contravention of the human understanding of death and natural law in general. Because Belacqua and *Policeman*'s narrator are magically able to continue doing these things in their bodies, a semblance of the ordinary is maintained and neither can recognize that the situation is not ordinary, or draw any kind of greater insight or meaning from the fact of their resurrections and their subsequent journeys. Belacqua, his narrator, and the *Policeman* wanderer begin but cannot sustain attempts to contemplate the logical contradictions of their situations. Their still-intact, still-living material bodies are both evidence of a supernatural at work and distract them from that supernatural.

The *Policeman* protagonist retains a pronounced, continuous physicality after death, despite our later understanding that his body has presumably been destroyed or much altered by a bomb at this moment – a later understanding that seems rather dubious in light of the fact that here, the narrator is bound to and even reassured by the limits of his body. In fact, the immediate material experience of his magically intact, sensing body prevents him for a long time from recognizing the "change" as fantastic, or arriving at any transcendent theories about human life, despite the fact that

the enduring body itself is evidence of some kind of violation of natural law as we know it. The narrator is able to maintain the impression that he is experiencing a material reality continuous with that of the moment and the days and years before by noticing that his shoulders are stiff from swinging the spade to kill Old Mathers. An injury incurred in the process of physical exertion remains present, as would be expected under ordinary circumstances. His supposedly immaterial "soul" Joe refers him to this physical sensory experience to verify the ordinary reality of the situation, sternly intoning, "*There is nothing dreamy about your stiff shoulders.*" (*TP* 25) The certainty of the shoulder pain vies with the failure of the narrator's senses to "give [him an] explanation," and facing a lack of physical sensory input about his new state and an enduring physical sensory connection to the old, he effectively behaves as if no change has occurred. Rather than try to analyze a change he cannot fully understand in physical terms, a change ambiguously characterized as possibly upon himself "or upon the room," he instead focuses on what physically perceptible and understandable evidence he does have in order to put the change out of his mind and resist questioning the continuity of his experience.

Likewise, his postmortem encounter with Old Mathers is not with an entity who has transcended the body and its limits in apparently transcending death. Mathers in fact bears the wounds he incurred at death, not magically healed but treated and dressed in typical fashion, a "sticking plaster" on his neck and bandages on the other parts of his body damaged in the narrator's attack. It is as if he has simply survived the murder attempt and is now recovering. The encounter is not ghostly, as the narrator realizes with horror: "His body was bandaged but his eyes were alive and so was his right hand and so was all of him." (*TP* 25) This piece-by-piece epiphany leads the narrator to speculate that the murder was in fact a dream, only to meet with the contradicting evidence of his painful shoulders. His ultimate response, however, is to maintain composure and a sense of normality by accepting and depending upon both of these sensory inputs – what his eyes see and

what his body feels – and all others available, even when they cannot be simultaneously correct. This moment of cognitive dissonance brings him "in some crooked way" to resolve "to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory." (*TP* 26) He moves on happily, enjoying the "pleasing" and familiar landscape of Irish bogland that awaits him when he leaves Mathers' house.

The limitation of his senses, and his disinclination to resolve contradictory sensory information with intellectual understanding, allow the narrator to happily miss or ignore magic again and again. Believing his eyes keeps the narrator proceeding as normal even when his eyes can't entirely tell him what they're looking at, suggesting that there are things to be seen in this adjusted reality about which human minds and eyes cannot communicate. Rather than startle or perplex him much, fantastic events and sights seem more likely to go over his head, yielding nothing to either his eyes or his mind, the two of which are often at odds, irreconcilable. As he did with the sight of Mathers and the simultaneous pain of his shoulders, the narrator declines to resolve such apparent contradictions with a coherent theory.

None of the later general explanations of this impossible dimension, whether provided by the novel or by secondary texts, do much to resolve or interpret these contradictions for the reader. After Mathers, the narrator's first indication that the world in which he finds himself may not be bound by ordinary laws of physics is the appearance of the police station. His journey thereto is, again, verified through a number of sensory inputs that affirm the workaday, continuous reality of which he is determined to reassure himself. Just as his stiff shoulders and the encounter with Mathers were no dream, the journey is "no hallucination," verified by the sun's heat, the hard ground underfoot, and the view that gradually shifts as he walks. He describes the insoluble contradiction produced by his eyes' inability to give meaningful information to his brain, and vice

versa: the uncannily depthless building leaves his "gaze faltering about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder." (*TP* 69) What seems to be a physical inability to focus his eyes jars against an internal conviction, the "sure knowledge deeply-rooted in my mind," that this is the right police station and that, impossibly, "there were people inside it."

While the narrator registers surprise and trepidation at the "unnatural and appalling" police station, he does not – perhaps to his own disadvantage – decided from then on to interpret the world around him as "unnatural" or unpredictable. His ultimate response to the visual-intellectual contradiction that the station produces is simply to proceed toward it with a confidence that puzzles him in his retrospective telling of the decision. What seems to have occurred is a pragmatic decision to ignore intimations of fantastic phenomena afoot, as long as it is still possible to navigate by ordinary physical means: there is nothing relevant to him about this building beyond the limited sense his senses can make of it. He concludes that approaching and interacting with this unnatural building doesn't actually necessitate having any meaningful account of it, and he might as well give upon such an account: "I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it." *(TP* 53) He cannot address the building's appearance as fantastic, he can only continue as usual, and finds that he is able to enter as he would an ordinary building.

Readers are no more privileged in their ability to assess and engage intellectually with the novel's fantastic than the narrator since our experience of the events is completely focalized through the narrator. Notably, the reader, too, is kept in the dark about the nature of the "change" that has occurred and thus continues to read in the way that the narrator continues to live: as if this is still a naturalistic world that will square with natural rules. As Anne Clissman, whose comprehensive study of O'Brien's fiction was the first of its kind and established reality and human interpretation and

representation thereof as a central focus of critical interest in *Policeman*, notes, the nonchalant mood sustained by keeping the narrator's death secret until the end of the novel produces the text's particular effect, inducing the reader to understand the narrative not as a pure fantasy but as "a picture of dislocated reality,"[23] and try to rationalize it. The effect would seem to be one of Todorovian hesitation among interpretations, although in this case the novel appears to purposely direct attention away from the mounting evidence of supernatural goings-on, even if this is ultimately an impossible feat of misdirection given the thoroughly non-naturalistic cast of the narrative. The moment of "change" is forgettable, and almost seems written to be forgotten, as the narrator himself forgets his name and goes on with his day.

One could argue that ultimately this delayed distribution of information about the real nature of the events emphasizes, via pulpy twist, the significance of the fantastic for the reader, if not the character himself, as the "solution" or key to the text: we discover that it is a fantastic text. As I discuss below however, the late-breaking revelations that the narrator has been dead all along and that the shadowy Policeman Fox is meddling with the natural order are entirely inadequate keys for interpreting the events. The revelations are thus rendered less important as plot points; the fantastic events do not make more sense in light of the revelations of the narrator's death or the eponymous third policeman's secret activities, and read more as tacked-on, ad hoc attempts to arrive at some kind of conventional narrative dénouement ill-suited to this narrative. The dissatisfying revelations point up the magical events' illegibility in human terms, and reinforce the sense of a misanthropic trickster intelligence behind the novel even as its own narrator is shown up as a chump.

The effect is not much different from that of "Echo's Bones," even though there the protagonist's death and his survival thereof are not a secret, making the fact that we are in a magical

[23] Clissman, 156.

world clear from the beginning and also openly unimportant. The narrative does not bother promising or implying a clarifying revelation to come and then renege, but it likewise portrays the law-breaking supernatural as ultimately intellectually inaccessible to humans even as their bodies live it. "Echo's Bones" presents Belacqua's death in a similarly forgettable way, so that both reader and character do not accord much importance to Belacqua's resurrection. He is simply not terribly interested in why he has come back to life; his own immediate physical experience upstages questions about the physical impossibility of that experience. A passing thought that he might not have come back so easily if he had been cremated instead of buried is, "happily for all of us[…]too egregious to detain him long," the narrator says, as if readers needn't let the fantastic impossibility of the situation distract from the fact of Belacqua sitting on his accustomed fence, smoking and picking his nose as he did before death.

Neither the *Policeman* narrator nor Belacqua is able to think long or deeply about the fantastic in relation to his own life. The *Policeman* narrator scoffs at Policeman Fox's uninspired use of the all-powerful, ur-substance omnium, but his own purportedly loftier ambitions are limited to accumulating money, influence, and an assortment of luxury goods. Belacqua experiences an impairment of the imagination even in his encounters with fantastic possibilities, and in fact, it is hinted, as a result of those fantastic encounters. After his miraculous revivification, Belacqua's abortive attempt to contemplate what may have happened physically to his remains concludes with the narrator's suggestion that through his death and miraculous return "his imagination had perished," and he cannot "quite bring[…]off[…]this simple little flight" of fancy. (EB 4) Living and breathing again, Belacqua still runs into the same intellectual limit that *Policeman*'s narrator faces with the police station. A fantastic happening appears to have been brought off in deed but the human witness' mind cannot accommodate it, and the result is that each chooses to ignore and proceed, foregoing any possible significance the encounter may have, reacting as if it were not fantastic

despite a vague sense that it is. Both situations are difficult and contradictory for a reader to imagine as well. The simple facts of the scene point to an enchantment of some kind, but neither characters nor narrators can offer any insight into these apparently supernatural confrontations.

These resurrected characters only seem able to take real notice of the dramatic ways their realities have been "dislocated," as Clissman would say, when such dislocations are pointed out to them explicitly. The "Echo's Bones" ensemble acknowledge and respond to the questions that magical happenings raise only grudgingly, and they are unimpressed by such observations, even inconvenienced. Belacqua, less than thrilled to be "restored to the jungle" of mortal life (EB 4), chalks it up to "'a lousy fate'" (EB 6) when the tawdrily seductive Zaborovna becomes the first and only character to point out, nonchalantly, that his situation is unusual. He is taken by surprise, having not noticed, when the same woman calls his attention to the fact that he has no shadow, and neither of them evidence much consternation over this physical impossibility. *Policeman*'s narrator is more disturbed than Belacqua in the moments of internalizing and reacting to fantastic instances, but he too mainly does so only when prompted (or baited) by his mysterious policemen guides, who themselves do not seem to have much insight into what they show him. There is no experience-structuring meaning to be drawn. He does not reflect on what these phenomena might mean in regard to the "change" that he dimly senses in himself and his existence. Rather, he distances the occurrences from what he thinks of as "ordinary" human experience and effectively denies them instead of reflecting that he himself may no longer be an "ordinary person". He is unable to gather crucial evidence to the contrary because, having decided to believe the evidence of his eyes above all else, he has nothing to go on when confronted with indescribable, invisible things that provoke clashes between the physical senses and the intellect. These contradictory clashes of logic, common sense, vision, touch, and memory are more pronounced in *Policemen* than "Echo's Bones" because

the narrator has just enough inclination to investigatory follow-through to reach such impasses. Belacqua, who avoids such struggles better, is more oblivious but perhaps happier for it.

The most significant examples of the *Policeman* narrator's sensorial and intellectual difficulty with the fantastic, when rather than just ignoring miraculous phenomena he can properly be said to be suspended between naturalistic and magical explanations of them, comes with Policeman MacCruiskeen's overt demonstrations of a number of objects of his own handiwork. The objects start out as ordinary and progress toward fantastic and ineffable, unable to be seen or described by the narrator. He can only tell us about the insufficiency of his physical senses and the failure of his mind to interpret what incomplete input his senses glean. His affective response, meanwhile, is repulsion, "sick utter horror" (109) at one point. Though the demonstrations, if inexplicable, do not seem particularly frightening, they throw the narrator into sensorial and mental chaos. As if putting the narrator through a diagnostic test, MacCruiskeen stimulates and puts into conflict with each other the narrator's touch, sight, and hearing. He pricks the narrator's hand by way of a spear with an invisible point extends unseen for six inches beyond its apparent end; he unpacks a nested series of boxes that grow sublimely smaller until they cannot be seen; he produces unearthly sounds from a clothing mangle that he claims can convert noise to light and vice versa, asking the narrator to interpret the mysterious shouts that issue from the instrument. The narrator produces wildly diverse interpretations of the same sound, leaving the reader to wonder if he is really hearing the same thing every time, or hearing properly at all.

His attempts to intellectually grasp the proceedings, and MacCruiskeen's attempts to explain them, are no better. MacCruiskeen appears to confirm and deny the fantastic-ness of the objects he curates, allowing the narrator to build up tentative explanations and then upending these explanations. He invites the awed narrator to investigate the spear by conventional, rational means,

telling him that it "'will take some analysis[…]intellectually.'" (*TP* 67) The narrator casts clumsily for comparisons, guessing that the point of the spear is "'very sharp'" and "'far thinner than a match,'" but the truth of the spear's point, however, literally cannot bear thought and thus will not yield to intellectual analysis: "'About an inch from the end it is so sharp that sometimes[…]you cannot think of it[…]because you will hurt your box with the excruciation of it." (*TP* 68

Moreover, MacCruiskeen laughs at the time the narrator spends over the extraordinary but still naturalistic explanation that the spear's point is simply so thin as to be invisible to the naked eye, and so sharp as to draw blood from him without pain. Crowing that the narrator has "'not got the whole gist of it at all,'" he goes on to reveal that all the focus on the point itself has been, as it were, beside the point: what drew the blood was a place an inch beyond the (already invisible) end of the blade, "'so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end.'" (*TP* 68-69) A bait-and-switch has taken place: after being encouraged to use his powers of perception and intellect to understand the spear, the narrator is told that these facilities are useless and irrelevant to the phenomenon under study. Not the spear itself but a Deleuzian zone of virtual possibility just beyond it is what he is, impossibly, expected to attend to. Likewise, the progressively smaller chests that MacCruiskeen produces dazzle the narrator in their craftmanship, but the most recently made chests, MacCruiskeen tells him, cannot be looked at at all: "'Nobody has seen the last five I made[…]The one I am making now is nearly as small as nothing.'" (*TP* 74) The narrator is perhaps too worn out at this point to try "put[ting…] thought around" what the size of "nothing" is. The knowledge of the enchanted objects becomes "no longer wonderful but terrible," (*TP* 73) with the narrator unable to find any empirical or rational way into experiencing or confirming the spear point or the smallest chests, tormented by the suggestion of their existence even as he cannot engage in any meaningful way with them.

Meanwhile, while humans are helpless in their efforts to perceive, understand, or truly explain these fantastic items in human terms and human language, the objects themselves have clear material effects on the humans with whom they intersect, making them more practically agentive than the humans are in *Policeman*'s human-fantastic encounters. This one-way relationship can be detrimental to the humans involved: the narrator bleeds at the prick of the not-spear. Despite his air of the magician in presenting his inventions, MacCruiskeen as well shows signs of strain from their magic. He admits that his own vision is damaged to the point that he anticipates needing spectacles, though when the narrator tries to small-talk that the box-building "'must be very hard on the eyes,"' MacCruiskeen attributes the damage to "'small print in newspapers and in the offeecial forms,"' (*TP* 74) suggesting that either he is comically unable to realize that the boxes must strain his eyes far more, or that he senses the boxes with something other than his ordinary human eyes, or "'the old eye,"' as he puts it. The turn of phrase implies the familiarity of this organ and its obsolescence as well when it comes to looking at the utterly alien boxes. Nor do these boxes pose the worst threat to the "old" human sensorium and intellect alike: MacCruiskeen later stops a mob of the narrator's would-be rescuers by painting his bicycle with an unspeakable color that drives all viewers mad. Though the policemen use this color effectively to repulse the rescue effort, they themselves have no control over its effects, and indeed need to know as little as possible about it in order to avoid madness themselves; they go into the confrontation passively blindfolded in order not to see the color at work. The narrator gloomily assumes that the color will do the rest without any participation from the policemen, destroying the senses and minds of the mob, leaving them with "blinded eyes and crazy heads". (*TP* 172).

Instances where humans do manage to manipulate fantastic substances to their own ends are thus limited and risky. The most powerful in this family of agentive fantastic materials that cripple human agency and even human consciousness is the one that seems the most quiescent, and is

certainly the most tempting to humans with delusions of agency who would like to exercise fantastic powers over the world: omnium, the meta-matter from which all things are supposedly made and with which Policeman Fox claims to have engineered all the events of the novel. Fox himself is a casualty of the madness-inducing paint, and his self-attributed orchestration of the events is dubious from a man who cannot think of applications for omnium that go beyond laundering his clothes and supplying himself with jam. He may have temporary possession of the omnium, and the ability to "[make] ribbons of the natural order" with it, but he cannot conceive of any meaningful way to use it, to the narrator's disgust.

Further, in *Policeman*, a deliberate refusal to engage the fantastic even with the crude tools of human sensoria and human intellect appears to function as self-protective, an attempt not just to keep one's own subjectivity intact but one's own sense of humanity and agency in the world. The blindfolded policemen have learned this lesson. While Belacqua is studiously incurious in the face of resurrection, giants who live in treehouses, and the simultaneous reanimation and decomposition of his body(ies), the *Policeman* narrator often actively resists accepting the supernatural, a resistance that seems to be founded in his affective aversion to magical doings. Indeed, he insists upon returning to a naturalistic account of what is happening around him even as such an account is shredded to "ribbons." His deep instinctive aversion to the magical is grounded in a sense that it conflicts with humanity itself. When the boxes have begun to get sublimely small but are still not impossibly so, he prays, in vain, for MacCruiskeen to stop unpacking them "while still doing things that were at least possible for a human to do." (*TP* 73) He is devastated when MacCruiskeen does not stop, but he stubbornly continues, to the end of the episode, to vacillate between awed horror and dogged, affected nonchalance, as if trying to will the situation back to normal. His makes his banal inquiry about MacCruiskeen's eyesight because he is "determined to pretend that everybody was an ordinary person like myself." (*TP* 74) Despite the fact that he has done a number of things he knows a

human cannot do, including entering the two-dimensional police station and holding a conversation with a dead man, the narrator seems to actively fend off the realization that he himself may not be "ordinary," or inhabit an "ordinary" world.

Humans and human agency are in the narrator's reckoning incompatible with the magical or the irrational: the apparent supernatural is not the domain of the human or the "ordinary person." Previous criticism has glossed the narrator's perverse dedication to the ordinary in the face of the supernatural and illogical as an argument for "common sense," and painted O'Brien himself as a champion for common sense over philosophical esotericism and logic games, but the narrative seems rather to critique common sense and the common senses, or at least to portray them as unevenly dependable, and all the more deceiving for that.[24] The narrator's naturalist recalcitrance prevents him from understanding what is really going on in his own story even as he tells it. Further, his enthusiasm for the bizarre, elaborately contrived pseudoscientific work of the philosopher De Selby testifies to an inability to make common-sense deductions even in a world where common sense seems generally to work. De Selby's theories haphazardly corroborate and argue against what the narrator is told in the topsy-turvy parish.

Suspension of Disbelief, Suspended: Reading the Unassimilable Fantastic

The *Policeman* narration itself refuses to allow its reader to engage with the fantastic that it depicts. It does not only represent a human who cannot seem to incorporate the fantastic, and vice versa. Its resistance to allegorical interpretation or even simply organization according to any set of rules that might govern its magic comes at the formal level as well as the representational. The novel forces the reader to repeat the ineffability of the narrator's fantastic experiences. Again and again the

[24] Clissman, 181.
Deane, 196.
Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 74.

narrator runs up against the limits of human language to describe what he encounters. The narrative is punctuated by regular quick-fire dialogues wherein the narrator is encouraged by another character to proliferate descriptive terms for the fantastic objects and phenomena he is shown, as if leading him on in a malicious guessing game to which there can be no right answer. Asked to speculate about the color of the madness-inducing paint, he produces a range of elaborate, poetic color descriptions, all of which he is told are not remotely right; similar equivocating attends the description of an ineffable magical substance that is neither smooth nor rough, not "steel" or "blankety" or "'the damp bread of an old poultice.'" (*TP* 156). Human linguistic creativity – and the narrator's guesses are nothing if not creative, and unpredictable – cannot hope to articulate the fantastic within the novel. Because the narrative is wholly delivered in the first person, this fantastic linguistic uncertainty introduces a level of formal anarchy that goes beyond the supernatural surprises of the plot, and beyond the temporary misrule that Richardson describes in the metafictional havoc of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Repeatedly, the character on whom we depend for an account of what is going on confesses that he cannot properly grasp it, or is told that he has "'not got the gist of it at all'" when he recites what he thinks he has understood.

Readers also seem to run up against a narratorial failure of imagination or a conscious refusal to imagine and describe Belacqua's exhumation of his own "remains (if any)" at the end of the story. (EB 49) The exhumation of Belacqua's still-interred body seems a logical contradiction of some sort since we have seen Belacqua behave in a manner that suggests the full limits and capabilities of an embodied, living man in all particulars except that he casts no shadow: he eats, he smokes, he fathers a child. The scene of the exhumation is rife with details of material sensory experience and embodiment, typically Beckettian in their slightly nauseating, visceral elaboration. Belacqua and the gravedigger Doyle wipe "clots of muck" from Belacqua's coffin, inhale the scent of his decaying body within, strain their eyes in the dark and grope with their hands. (EB 48) We do not get to see

or otherwise sense what lies within, however, because in this part of the scene we are abruptly confined to Doyle's point of view and the seemingly embodied Belacqua obscures the contents of the box with his "peering bulk," a bulk that at the same time is supposed to be inside the coffin. (EB 49) Doyle either does not see or cannot take in Belacqua's "find," and we are told only, after the fact, that Belacqua has found a "handful of stones." Whether this is a metaphorical reference to Belacqua's bones, long worn and weathered like those of the titular Echo, an indication that Belacqua's death and burial have somehow been faked all along with a coffin weighted by rocks, or a more enigmatic manifestation we cannot tell.[25]

Even before the stones are mentioned, in the moments immediately after Belacqua looks inside, the narrative zooms out and takes on a teasing, prevaricating tone that recalls the disobliging attitude of *Policeman* toward its reader. "What a scene when you come to think of it!" crows the narrator, and proceeds to tell us no more than what we know about the scene already, albeit in grander terms as if trying to hide the emptiness of the description and pad out the image of a bedraggled Belacqua standing amid churned earth: there is "the prescribed hush of great solemnity," the "ponderous anxiomaniac on the brink in the nude like a fly on the edge of a sore," the "dawn toddling up the mountains." "What a scene! Worthy of Mark Disney," the paragraph concludes. The narrator either deliberately or accidentally gets Walt Disney's name wrong but, either way, refers the reader to the visual component of another narrative altogether, and a vague one at that; the scene is compared not to a particular scene from a Disney film or even a particular film but to "Disney" generally. The narrator seems to lazily suggest substituting any Disney scene secondhand to imagine this one, although of course the idea that the "Echo's Bones" scenes could have anything in

[25] It seems possible that the stones anticipate the small white stones that the later Molloy will suck in uncertain rotation as if seeking some sort of material continuity that does not inhere in his own dilapidating body.

common with the Disney aesthetic seems laughable, and the comparison provides no real help. Against our will we are directed away from Belacqua and the coffin, with a narrator who affects an inability to tell us what actually happens next when a presumably embodied, living Belacqua faces his impossibly dead body.

Both of these modes of fantastic narrative imply that their own composition for human consumption is contradictory: the fantastic is an utter departure from the human that cannot fully be witnessed by human, much less assimilated intellectually. *Policeman* and "Echo's Bones" both limit their readers to human vantage points on the fantastic, and these vantage points prove to be blinkered, however perceptive the reader. Gradually, *Policeman* shows language to be particularly ad hoc and inadequate in relation to the fantastic, quite literally a series of wrong and hopelessly mundane guesses. All the descriptions the narrator offers are rejected, on top of which he is told that the various miraculous objects he has been asked to believe in may not exist at all. Likewise, having required that readers suspend disbelief to follow the fantastic events of the narrative, the novel now refuses to offer anything positive to believe, to tell us what we've suspended disbelief for, leaving a kind of lacuña to frustrate even willing, cooperating readers.

"Echo's Bones" produces a version of this lacuña around fantastic content when Beckett's narrator becomes distracted in the moment of exhumation and when Belacqua himself obscures the proceedings. These moments are not quite as unstable, however, because they still provide definite, if limited, descriptions of what is empirically taking place, even if they do not provide access to everything that is happening. *Policeman* does not flinch or look away like Beckett's narrator, it refuses outright to represent fantastic events: while dealing directly with supposed physical objects, it cannot even assert that these objects are there or not there. The result is that the narrator is able to remain toggling between a naturalistic worldview and a fantastic one, and he is free to choose the

naturalistic as less disturbing most of the time, to discount the fantastic interpretation as irrelevant to him.

The same interpretative options apply to the novel. Its equivocation on the fantastic and the ability of the human to perceive it means that a world where the fantastic is present or absent is functionally the same from an oblivious human perspective. Having closed his eyes in horror against the unintelligible spectacle of MacCruiskeen unpacking the chests, the narrator opens them to momentary relief, "happy that there was nothing to see." (*TP* 72) That joy is short-lived: MacCruiskeen reveals that he has in fact produced a further chest invisible to the naked eye, and that there are more to come that cannot be seen by any means. Momentarily, however, blissfully unable to see the fantastic feat that has occurred, the narrator is able to believe that he still lives in an ordinary world. The novel suggests that its own descriptions of events cannot positively differentiate between naturalistic and fantastic scenarios. MacCruiskeen may simply be a liar and the events may be wholly within the realm of the natural, or something supernatural may have taken place, but the novel's representation would look the same either way: the narrator would open his eyes to see nothing on the table, and only the secondhand word of MacCruiskeen to verify that something fantastic had happened. Human language and the evidence it is able to record are simply not fine-tuned enough to register events of this nature.

Todorov and Richardson both grant language a privileged status in the fantastic and unnatural narratives they examine: language in these narratives enables humans to access experiences, worlds, and stories that are otherwise unavailable (whereas the experience of a real place or real, possible events and situations can be at least approximated in the real world without having to read about them). Todorov writes that the fantastic as a genre is inherently closely tied to language because the fantastic can only exist in linguistic representation: "The supernatural is born

of language alone because language allows us to conceive what is always absent."[26] In other words, our only experience of the fantastic is necessarily through verbal narrative of some kind; the fantastic *is* by definition verbal. Richardson makes a similar point, with different emphases, in defining unnatural narratives as antimimetic, narratives that set out not to represent the real but to present unreal situations and worlds through language. As an example he offers O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, because the novel's plot is generated by layered metafictional and linguistic play. The rebellion of fictional characters against their author represents a situation never encountered in real life. Such metafictional insubordinations, Richardson argues, suggest to readers that they themselves may be fictional or created from language;[27] the effect may be unsettling but, as Todorov argues about fantastic narrative, can also be said to evoke for readers the otherwise unavailable experience of metafictionality. As figured by Todorov and Richardson, language is an enchantment of its own.

These arguments cannot be made for language in *Policeman*, which has a different – and lesser – representational relationship to the fantastic than critics have granted to language in other fantastic or nonmimetic texts. *Policeman* confronts readers with a fantastic that they may not be able to experience as existing even on the page, just as *Policeman*'s narrator struggles to experience it. Indeed, the novel preemptively denies attempts to imagine its contents. Rather than offering a new experience, the novel proscribes the experience of the fantastic and the anti-mimetic; its uncertain, unwitnessed magical events offer a not-experience. If, as Richardson claims, A*t Swim-Two-Birds* intimates that readers themselves may be fictional, *Policeman* can at the most suggest that its fantastic events may have real-world rule-breaking, supernatural counterparts that real-world humans are simply unable to fully perceive or engage with. This fantastic, then, can be said to function in a comparable but more destabilizing way than Richardson attributes to metafictional play and its

[26] Todorov, 82.
[27] Richardson

power to confound hierarchies of fictionality and make the reader wonder about his or her own place in these hierarchies. *Policeman* represents (or doesn't represent) a fantastic that is by turns contradictorily asserted and denied, confounding the sense of what is "real" even just within the world of the novel. The difficulty of discerning the fantastic even on the page directs readers to the possibility that there is a real-world, material fantastic beyond human perception. Like the possibility that readers themselves are fictional, the possibility of an imperceptible fantastic is of course untestable and unprovable. While both possibilities open up an endless vista of speculation, however, a metafictional text like *At Swim-Two-Birds* establishes a narrative of definite occurrences that at least have truth value within the world of the novel. *Policeman* is a narrative that constantly denies its own ability to imagine the fantastic even as it puts fantastic happenings at the center of the narrative.

Bad Excuses: Inadequate Explanations and Misreading Traps

The result is that the novel's fantastic episodes do not provide a unified model of any kind of ontologically dependable reality, though they undermine various frameworks by which reality is discerned and understood – scientific understanding, philosophy, religion, common sense. In this section of the chapter, I explore the inadequate and contradictory explanations, debunkings, and allegories that the novel offers or appears to offer to account for its fantastic content. First I explore the thoroughly unsatisfying explanations that are offered within the world of the novel for the events that take place. I then move to consider allegorical and philosophical interpretations that are suggested but ultimately undermined by the novel. MacCruiskeen's sundry fantastic creations and discoveries seem to challenge multiple epistemological traditions, but they cannot be summarized to provide a self-consistent account of any set magic or natural principles at work. Denials of and arguments against the fantastic in the novel are equally piecemeal and never final: fantastic phenomena may appear to discredit an old model of reality, but they do not necessarily cause those

who subscribe to this old model to jettison it. The narrator and his mysterious soul Joe constantly doubt and deny the policemen's revelations, clinging to the remnants of what they think they know. Neither can formulate a totalizing rebuttal to the supernatural events they witness: instead, both patch up their damaged worldviews by laughably makeshift, piecemeal means. As I discuss above, the narrator continually tries to explain his situation in "ordinary" terms, determined by sheer force of will to believe himself an "ordinary person" in an ordinary world. At the same time, he draws on the fanciful phenomenological theories of his beloved De Selby to fill in gaps, theories that are founded on anything but common sense. These strategies serve him poorly or not at all throughout his journey.

The narrator's wrongheaded approach to events can be said even to start before his conscious insistence on viewing them as ordinary. He is doomed in even trying to look for any explanation at all. Because he retains the notion that some kind of orderly causal relationship exists as a throughline for all his experiences in the parish, he looks for unifying explanations when none exist, and at least partially accepts some that are simply insufficient representations of reality, as if resigning himself to an incorrect model as better than no model at all. Two universal explanations are finally offered in close succession near the end of the novel. Both are narrated as moments of anagnorisis for the protagonist, although they do not explain much. The narrator has to consciously work to assimilate these explanations, and both will vanish from his mind shortly afterward, leaving no sense that they would have been of much use anyway. Both are presented by characters who insist that they are ordinary and rational explanations, un-fantastic, despite the fact that their ordinariness is unconvincing. Readers who accept both putative dénouements in turn are made aware of their own undiscriminating willingness to look for and accept even the most tortured "logical" explanations.

First, there is the narrator's conversation with Policeman Fox, who breezily tells him,

> "Like everything that is hard to believe and difficult to comprehend[…]it is very simple and a neighbor's child could work it all out without being trained[…]You thought there was magic in [what you've seen in the parish], not to mention monkey-work of no mean order?"
>
> "I did."
>
> "But it can all be explained, it was very simple and the way it was all worked will astonish you when I tell you."
>
> *TP* 187

Simple the explanation may be, in that it consists of one word – omnium – but it remains fantastic despite Fox's implication that there was nothing magical about it. Further, we are given no details about what Fox does with this magical substance in order to influence the narrator's story, and no rationale for why he does it. The narrator's credulity, and his ensuing plans for his own omnium-manipulated world, come not from a rational evaluation of Fox's tale but an eagerness to believe anything that will resolve the uncomfortable memories of irreducible magic into a single tame account: "His offer to explain hundreds of miracles in one simple explanation was very tempting. Even that knowledge might repay me for the uneasiness I felt in his company." (*TP* 187) The redundancy of "explain in […]explanation" emphasizes the narrator's short-circuiting logic: any purported "explaining" counts as a satisfactory "explanation," the more efficient the better. That this explanation is just as wild and inscrutable as the "miracles" it purports to explain does not occur to him, or he keeps it willfully out of mind. Nor does he reflect that MacCruiskeen's own explanation for many of his miraculous inventions was omnium, and that in those moments the narrator regarded omnium as another miraculous and disturbing claim in need of explanation.

The novel's second global explanation comes a few pages later when the narrator stumbles back into his house to find an aged and shocked John Divney, who conveniently manages despite dying of fright to give him a story that subsumes the omnium explanation: the narrator has been dead all along, murdered by Divney. Even for the narrator, however, and for readers, this is not

much of an explanation. It addresses the narrator's adventures in less detail than does the omnium explanation, and it leaves us with the fact that the narrator has continued to exist despite having been dead for years. Indeed, the mere fact that the narrator is somehow able to give us this explanation, or any other, is impossible in that moments later he recounts that his mind is "completely void" and he has no memory of anything that has passed. The explanation, offered by O'Brien as well in the Saroyan letter, that the narrator has been "dead all the time," is one that the narrator never fully accepts, telling us, "I do not know[…]even whether I believed him." By the time we read of it, impossibly, we are reading an explanation that neither Divney nor the narrator believes anymore. Neither is aware even of a need for an explanation as they go about what promise to be further supernatural adventures. Moreover, we cannot tell whether the "dead all the time" explanation contradicts, complements, or simply wipes away the earlier explanation of omnium.

Explanations are further complicated by the fact that throughout the novel the narrator's soul Joe, who has disappeared by the time of the final explanations, claims to have his own privileged knowledge of what is going on and mentions neither omnium nor the narrator's death. Joe continues to present himself as an expert on the metaphysical despite regular indications that he has no clearer sense of what is going on than the narrator. He seems here to be practicing a kind of totalizing fantastic theorizing of his own, by which he alternatively discounts the novel's fantastic altogether and, seeming to anticipate critical work on the novel, tries to assimilate it to an allegory. "*I think I can claim to be an authority on the subject of eternity*," he tells the narrator when the policemen claim that "eternity" is "up the lane" and that they visit it regularly. This purported expertise is not much in evidence, given that Joe is unable to explain any of the narrator's other encounters with the numinous, and meets the narrator's idle speculation that Joe may have a "scaly" body with suspicious hostility, hardly the reaction of a metaphysical being who is truly above transient embodiment.

Comic quibbles as the point, only sense we can make of this situation? Joe's argument against the policemen's claims about eternity is not a sweeping pronouncement on the true nature of eternity but a comic quibble. He fixates on the elevator by which Sergeant Pluck says this eternity can be reached and says he might accept that eternity is up the lane, but cannot countenance the suggestion that it can be accessed by elevator. In response to the narrator's understandable objection that "Surely[…]if we concede that eternity is up the lane, the question of the lift is a minor matter," Joe provides no further support for his stance beyond repeating himself and appealing to his own authority, as if an elevator's incompatibility with matters of the sublime and numinous is self-evident:

> *I bar the lift. I know enough about the next world to be sure that you don't get there and come back out of it by a lift[…]Unless the word 'lift' has a special meaning[…]I suppose a smash under the chin with a heavy spade could be called a 'lift'*." (*TP* 126)

Joe's knowledge of the "next world" is questionable given that he and the narrator turn out to already be inhabiting a next world, or an other-world, and Joe is unaware. This moment also provides what seems to be a comment on allegorical reading. Notably, Joe attempts to square the lift with his notion of eternity by reading it allegorically, arguing that Sergeant Pluck cannot actually mean what he says and that when used in conjunction with eternity, "lift" must have "*special meaning*." He goes on to theorize that in sending Old Mathers to his death with a spade blow, the narrator could be said to have given him a lift to eternity. The allegorical interpretation of "lift" as murder or death does not really fit given that Pluck has already said that the eternity "lift" can go both ways.

Soon after, Joe and the narrator discover that Pluck is not giving lift a "special meaning" but is referring quite literally to an elevator. Where the narrator expects, when the elevator comes to rest, "some horrible incalculable and devastating thing[…]for one thing a blaze of eye-destroying light,"

(*TP* 130), there is only a dim industrial corridor and a series of rooms, a basement such as might be reached by any elevator. In this eternity, material objects of all kinds can be conjured out of nothing, though not transported back up the lift, so that its magical aspects have little real meaning or benefit for the narrator. The policemen praise eternity mostly for its "convenience" (*TP* 133): no time passes in this labyrinth, which means that they don't have to shave if they sleep here. Ultimately, eternity's lift doesn't require "special meaning" because eternity itself has no clear special meaning. Joe and his instinct to read the supernatural allegorically are both discredited here. Though he acts as a guide to the narrator, Joe proves wholly unqualified. There is no sage Virgil here in either Joe or the policemen.

Such a moment reflects the temptation to read for totalizing allegories of eternity and the justice of the "next world." To read the parish as a "hell" and the narrator's trials there as his proper "punishment" requires vast simplification, however. The parish itself, described as a distinctively Irish and for the most part naturalistic landscape of bogs and peat-cutters, is varied, by turns otherworldly and then so picturesque and familiar that the narrator turns unexpectedly lyrical as he takes it in. Though he is subjected to moments of terror, some induced by the supernatural phenomena is encounters and some more banal, as when a bandit holds him at knifepoint or the policemen threaten to execute him, the narrator does not suffer any hardship that can be interpreted as Dantean contrapasso for killing Mathers. Nor does he come at any point to reflect upon, much less regret, the crime; by the end of the novel he has nearly forgotten Mathers, and convinced himself rather that he is the one wronged by being falsely accused of a crime he has indeed committed. O'Brien's paratextual description of the narrator as "a heel and a killer" jars with the character as written, a passive, bookish sophist who invites readerly complicity and identification with his curiosity and confusion in the face of the absurd.

Justice in this world is not perfected but hopelessly convoluted, so that the narrator's eventual death sentence at the hands of the policemen seems not fitting but unjust under the circumstances. Though the narrator begins the novel by confessing to the deed in lurid detail, by the time that he is charged with and convicted for Mathers' murder, it is difficult not to sympathize with his protests. Mathers has been reported murdered under different circumstances that appear to have nothing to do with the narrator and resemble the modus operandi of another character, and the policemen seize on the narrator because their overseeing inspector demands that they hold someone accountable. The narrator cries out in genuine indignation that this is "unjust…rotten…fiendish," (*TP* 98) and the fact is that he seems to be technically right even though, like Belacqua's simultaneously decaying and quick body, the situation presents paradoxes that contradict reason and natural law. What justice would be here is hard to say, but the policemen's casual abuse of the narrator's lack of official identity evokes disappearances and the victimization of the disenfranchised under corrupt political regimes. The narrator might deserve punishment, but he doesn't deserve this one, arrived at in this roundabout way.[28]

This afterlife simply does not have the gravitas or centralization of a hell. The narrator's experience in the afterlife is frequently unpleasant, but it has its moments of delight as well, as when he takes in the beauty of the countryside and contemplates what will become of him the day before he is to be executed. Apart from the author's offhand epistolary use of "hell," the interpretation of the parish as hell does not work especially well. Certainly, it is not legible in terms of Catholic or any Christian doctrine or tradition. The forces at work do not seem to be interested in giving the narrator a neat comeuppance; they appear to be generally uninterested in him. Rather, like Belacqua,

[28] Clissman's characterization of the narrator's sentence as fitting in that it is "about as fair as the way he murdered Mathers" seems rather like Sergeant Pluck's warped reasoning. (Clissman, 170) Moreover, the fact that the narrator is able to actually elude the sentence means that, even if the sentence does represent justice, it is not carried out.

he is buffeted around the post-mortal realm incidentally, a casualty of enchantments that have nothing to do with him.

Shedding the expectation that the parish is an anthropocentric hell as traditionally imagined – a place of eternal, unchanging torment for immoral humans – reveals further fantastic aspects of the novel that appear to invite (and in critical practice have frequently invited[29]) familiar anthropocentric theological or philosophical interpretations but do not in fact accommodate such interpretations particularly well. Such aspects, like the parish, cannot be fully reconciled with an allegorical reading and thus remain "irreducibly" fantastic.

Chief among these is the novel's representation of supernatural persistence beyond apparent natural boundaries and barriers: the narrator's enduring post-death consciousness, the unending sequences of miraculous objects, the uncannily recurring events. Eternity or infinitude is one of the novel's explicit concerns, with its subterranean "eternity" and the narrator's apparent immortality beyond death. Within these larger plot points, the narrative offers recurring instances that seem to evoke the philosophically familiar motif of "infinite regressions" and tempt allegorical critical readings that draw out philosophical meaning for humans. The chests-within-chests; the endlessly reflected mirrors of De Selby's experiment; and finally the narrator's circular story, which sends him reembarking, memory wiped, upon what is apparently to be the same journey; have all been read as straightforward reiterations of this motif, though to very different allegorical ends. However, I maintain that to regard either MacCruiskeen's demonstrations or the narrator's supposed hell-journey as infinite regressions is to shoehorn these pieces of the narrative into a neat philosophical gloss that doesn't actually fit when examined closely.[30]

[29] See Clissman, Hopper, Booker.

[30] Critical work often assumes, as if it were noncontroversial, that infinite regression is a motif of the novel. In addition to challenging this reading of (apparent) recurrence in the novel, I suggest that the

First of all, these supposed repeated manifestations of the same motif in fact differ markedly from one another, and issue from different sources that represent competing systems of authority. Secondly, when examined closely, none of the apparent "infinite regressions" of the novel are actually infinite at all. Reading these different fantastic moments as simply duplicated allegorical representations of the same philosophical theme overlooks the painstaking specificity that prevents them from being assimilated into a totalizing interpretation. They each occur under different cosmological circumstances, and not all within the supposed hell of the parish: de Selby's mirror experiment, recounted secondhand by the narrator, is (supposedly) conducted in the world of the living before any of the events in the parish; the narrator encounters MacCruiskeen's chests after death; his journey through the parish begins to repeat itself after he somehow reenters the world of the living and returns home, appearing to his erstwhile confederate. Further, the sequences involve different fantastic physical objects that warp different dimensions of reality and natural law in varying combinations and directions: de Selby claims to see himself impossibly regressing backward through time, younger and younger, in different mirrors; MacCruiskeen presents a series of objects that grow impossibly spatially smaller; the narrator passes through the familiar physical space of his home village, years forward in time, and appears as a ghost after his death.

Nor can these sequences exactly be said to "continue," at least not uniformly in the way of a true infinite regression, wherein a causal chain reaches back indefinitely, each proposition or question necessarily and predictably generating the next one. Their idiosyncrasies, changes, and

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"infinite regression" interpretation, ironically, is something of a dead end in that it seems to inspire equally totalizing conclusions that to my mind do not represent the novel's determined resistance to cosmic pronouncements. For Anne Clissman, the unfathomably repeating sequences confirm the existence of a god who should be trusted where human understanding fails, leading her to pronounce O'Brien "a deeply religious man" (Clissman, 323). On the other hand, N. Keith Booker argues that the infinite regressions preclude appeals to God as a first mover, and reinforce the novel as "antiepistemological." (Booker, 47.)

interruptions keep them from serving as abstract philosophical thought experiments, instead making them disparate episodes of unpredictable material enchantment. Meaning cannot be derived from them as it might be, however provisionally, from a thought experiment such as an actual infinite regress.

Certainly the narrator is troubled by the suggestion that MacCruiskeen's boxes may go on forever, past invisibility, though his main concern seems to be his own inability to verify that the smallest boxes exist. MacCruiskeen establishes, however, that the succession of chests is currently finite, and still being developed; he has been adding more boxes over a period of years, and at different times the sequence has been shorter. It has not always existed in its current form, nor does it always go on. The box sequence is, in fact, not technically an infinite regression but a finite progression from the point of view from which it is described in the novel. Rather than facing endless boxes containing more boxes with no first mover in sight, we begin with the creator of the boxes, who displays the first box he ever made "when [he] was a lad," (*TP* 70) a first box that does not lead to another box to contain it. Effectively, *Policeman* introduces the narrator and readers to the first mover in the causal chain – an unremarkable-seeming man. Over the course of what appears to have been an ordinary mortal lifetime beginning with a childhood, he has pursued this project, as he has his other wondrous endeavors, without a clear premeditated purpose (he mentions that at one point he considered using the first box to store his "letters from Bridie" with their "hot bits," or perhaps his shaving supplies) and without any particular insight into what he has created, unable to even talk authoritatively about where the point of the spear ends.

Likewise, de Selby's footnoted reflection of one mirror with another, a procedure that can be used to illustrate or at least analogize infinite regression under natural law in the real world, is in fact *not*, strictly speaking, an infinite regression in the singular, law-breaking instance that de Selby

describes. De Selby has, if anything, less insight into and awareness of the magic he appears to have engendered here than MacCruiskeen. We begin not with a reflection of de Selby that implies further reflections moving symmetrically and endlessly both up and down the chain, but with de Selby starting the sequence by looking into a mirror to generate a series of reflections that moves toward a hypothesized endpoint "back to the cradle". (*TP* 65) What de Selby claims to have seen is not a succession of identical images but a dynamic visual timeline of his face growing incrementally younger as the reflections continue. Each reflected mirror holds a *different* reflection, quite independent of whatever has come before it, so that the reflections are not even clearly causally related to one another. With typical ineptitude, de Selby offers one of the novel's many insufficient, mundane explanations for this extramundane occurrence: because light takes time to travel, one sees not a current but an infinitesimally younger version of oneself in a mirror. This is of course no explanation at all for de Selby's actual observation, and a simple failure of conceptual understanding on de Selby's part, or else an understanding of the laws governing light that departs from a natural law. Whatever the case, the de-senescing reflections here cannot be philosophically generalized as an infinite regress, and thus used to shore up an account of the novel as pure philosophical allegory. Nor do the fantastic reflections, though created by a human, suggest any kind of godlike power or capacity for supernatural manipulation on the part of this human. Like MacCruiskeen, de Selby instigates a fantastic event but fails to register that it is outside of the natural because of his vapid misinterpretation of the results.

Finally, the narrator's apparent second time through the parish does not necessarily imply that there will be many times to follow, or that nothing can change in this sequence. Though it is tempting to infer that he will "start thro' all the same terrible adventures again," as O'Brien wrote in his letter to Saroyan, and to recognize in this fate a familiar Sisyphean form of posthumous punishment, we have no guarantee that the narrator's walk back toward the police station at the end

of the novel is the second in an endless loop he is doomed to repeat forever. In fact, the sense of justice or punishment inflicted upon the narrator decreases from the first journey to the second: in the second, he appears to have no awareness of having killed Mathers. Nor is the reader reminded of this fact; both the narrator and the reader are less likely the second time through to appreciate the narrator's fate as deserved or, indeed, as torturous.

In its events and in the text itself, the second time is not even a perfect repetition of his first journey; the final paragraphs of the novel come close to repeating some paragraphs verbatim about the parish journey that occur in the fourth chapter, but the after-death journey itself does not begin in the same place. The narrator's encounter with Mathers, which we are led to understand directly follows the narrator's death, is omitted from this iteration, as is his meeting with the one-legged highwayman Martin Finnucane. Mathers, in fact, seems to be gone altogether from the narrator's memory. The omissions mean that later plot points – the narrator's summons to Finnucane and his men to save him from hanging, the encounter with a Mathers-faced Policeman Fox, the all-consuming search for Mather's cashbox that guides the action – cannot be reproduced exactly as the journey continues. Instead the first notable event of the journey is the appearance of the uncanny police station, which is no longer "the greatest surprise I had encountered since I had seen the old man in the chair" (53) but "the greatest surprise I had encountered ever." (198) Moreover, the narrator sets out not alone but accompanied by his shifty coconspirator Divney, so that he waits for Divney to catch up to him so that "both of us" enter the police station and behold Sergeant Pluck. Already, evidence is mounting that this journey will be different from the previous one, and that the possibility exists that further different events will occur. An allegory has a necessary, foregone conclusion; the fantastic narrative of *Policeman* is unruly, open to modification. Its fantastic events, then, cannot have uniform meanings pinned to them; they do not occur simply to illustrate moral or philosophical lessons.

Further, readers do not experience the narrator's journey as an infinite one with no beginning and no end. If it were a true infinite regression as a reading experience, it would send us back to the start of the novel, looping endlessly, with no way to know how many times the journey might already have repeated itself before the narrative picks up and details just one iteration. Instead, we start with a part of the narrative that is never repeated, and thus experience what we understand to be the narrator's actual first encounter with the events in all their miraculous singularity, his bad memory notwithstanding. The novel itself is not circular: the final paragraphs do not lead us back to the beginning of the novel but back to the narrator's death, which occurs some time into the novel, after the narrator has summarized his childhood, his family, his early studies, and his alliance and plotting with John Divney. The inclusion of the narrator's particular biography, some of it sympathetic and humanizing, argues against viewing him as an allegorized figure of a sinner in a world run by a God who must be trusted (as in Anne Clissman's interpretation) or as an allegory of human uncertainty in a world of perpetual epistemological uncertainty (in Booker's). The not-quite-infinite regressions and the not-quite-looping narrative give *Policeman*'s events a sense of singularity: they are not recurring typological expressions of universal, generalizable truths, but specific, albeit baffling, occurrences that cannot be fully subordinated to a larger narrative of human immorality punished. There is no clear evidence to suggest that the narrator's occasionally frightening but often pleasant visit in the parish is in any way relative to, let alone inevitably produced by, the murder he has committed, or that his moral state will continue to produce the same conditions and events over and over again.

"Echo's Bones" reveals a similar resistance to infinite regression and narrative looping when juxtaposed with *Policeman*, as well as a specificity that distracts from would-be attempts to allegorize. Like *Policeman*, "Echo's Bones" sets up what seems to be a repeating life-death cycle as some sort of earned punishment for its protagonist. However, the logic of these loops proves impossible to

follow. When followed, it leads to gaps that belie infinite repetition. What is left is an "irreducible" magic like *Policeman*'s, too idiosyncratic to bear unified allegorical or philosophical weight. While Belacqua's resurrection is framed in vague terms of justice and debt, following the logic of these terms proves impossible.

Belacqua's "existence," the narrator says, was "an injustice" that necessitates death, but death is not a sufficient condition for "atonement": this "debt of nature[…]can no more be discharged by the mere fact of kicking the bucket than descent can be made into the same river twice." If we follow this reasoning through, it emerges that to atone for having lived, Belacqua must live again, committing the very "injustice" that will again demand his death, and apparently more beyond it. While we might be inclined to gloss this convoluted explanation as an infinite regression in which Belacqua must die because he has lived and live because he has died, thus setting up a cycle of lives and deaths that each necessitate the next, the narrator's actual explanation, read closely, is not so neat: what the narrator actually says is that Belacqua must die because he has lived but also *live*, again, because he has lived. This "justice" is not a reliable circle of biconditional inputs and outputs (e.g. X yields Y and Y yields X) but in fact a logically unsound proposition where "life" can yield either death or more life. There is no way to predict Belacqua's moral debt and its implications. The narrator seems initially to promise some sort of moral meaning in attributing Belacqua's miraculous resurrection to "injustice," but ultimately leaves us uncertain of whether Belacqua lives, died, did either/both, or will do either in the future.[31] The odd comparison of the unshakable (but also

[31] This of course could be taken as a metatextual reflection on fictionality. Belacqua, being fictional, is neither dead nor alive, and his alternately being killed and spared in the text complicates this situation further. Beckett comments more explicitly upon this paradox in the Molloy trilogy, which regularly examines the illusory creative power of its narrator to give and take away life from the characters. In *The Unnamable*, the narrator does and undoes reality: "There he is now with breath in his nostrils, it only remains for him to suffocate. The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he'll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn't breathe yet, he'll never breathe." (Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The*

unknowable, inconsistent) "debt of nature" to the philosophical commonplace that it is impossible to step in the same river twice further suggests the impossibility of repetition and predictability.

Humans themselves are outside the natural order here. An "ordinary person," as *Policeman*'s narrator purports to be, does not exist in "Echo's Bones." Neither death nor life are natural states for Belacqua; dead, he is a "trespasser on the beyond," but while alive he is "an injustice". Belacqua's implied guilt and his punishment are made no more legible than the logic of that passage as he passes between life and death. The nature of Belacqua's moral failings is elusive, and he moves through the story with the listless demeanor of a man not so much suffering as enduring, indifferently, his apparent immortality beyond death: to read the "muck" to which Belacqua returns as a torture chamber on a cosmic scale would be, it seems, to exalt it far too much.

The supernatural elements of this final coda do not then give Belacqua's life or deeds any more cosmic consequence or sense. His peripatetic passivity and his unambitious pursuit of mean sensory indulgence in an uncomfortable but familiar world, albeit a more fantastic-seeming one, are consistent with his characterization in the previous stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks*. Like *Policeman*, "Echo's Bones" ends with the verbatim reprise of a line that initially falls in the middle of the narrative and also appears in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, but similarly, this reprise occurs in a different context and does not seem to indicate that any part of the story will repeat again in a redemptive or corrective way. Indeed, the novel's final, maledictory repetition of "So it goes in the world" suggests desultory linear movement without recognizable theme or circularity. The same line underscores the birth of Belacqua's daughter to Lady Gall, but here it instead accompanies the exhumation of

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Unnamable [New York: Grove Press, 1965], 355.) However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, I feel that the narrator's pointed refusal to comment directly upon what Belacqua finds in the coffin leaves room as well for a more mysterious, reticent kind of enchantment in addition to the enchantment of fictionality.

Belacqua's dubious remains. The circular invocation of the phrase emphasizes discontinuity rather than adding any sense of a wholesome circle of life: the birth of the baby – not the desired son, and outside the Gall lineage anyway – vies with her father's apparent supernatural inability to die. Indeed, the repetition of the sentence does not seem to imply any connection to or repetition of the events that first occasioned it; it is as if this previous moment is as gone from Belacqua's memory as the first journey through the parish from *Policeman*'s narrator's.

Nor does Belacqua's impossible self-exhumation represent any kind of clear culmination or full-circle conclusion to the bleak but still not quite fantastic adventures that precede it in *More Pricks Than Kicks*. Belacqua's asymmetrically fantastic trajectory is not unlike that of the *Policeman* narrator, who goes from a "queer" and uncannily narrated life to a fully fantastic afterlife. His life is a succession of events that remain causally ambiguous. Caretakers and authorities make unexplained entrances and exits and his own body undergoes detachments and augmentations to which he submits without question, having "my leg broken for me" and discovering "when I went on my way again" that he has acquired a wooden replacement.

Likewise, the earlier stories of *Pricks* could be said to constitute a fantastic prodrome, to use a pathological analogy in keeping with Beckett's interest in failing and decaying bodies, a period of gathering symptoms that do not quite reach the exuberant level of enchantment seen in "Echo's Bones" but presage it, as well as faintly resembling the material enchantments of *Policeman*. The stories direct attention to nonhumans to raise disquieting questions about them. Belacqua becomes preoccupied with a lobster he has carried all day, and while he eventually dismisses his qualms by asserting that lobsters die "a quick death," the narrator baldly contradicts him, refusing to let the story resolve with this rationalization. Belacqua is dazzled by a bicycle and abandons a girlfriend to ride away on it in an escape much like that of *Policeman*'s bicycle-infatuated narrator. As Beckett's

later fiction continues to do, the stories dehumanize the human body, which is shown as a cumbersome, brittle object, breaking apart and failing to maintain its putative boundaries, though never transgressing assumed bodily limits so egregiously as Belacqua does in rising from the dead for "Echo's Bones." Intriguing nonhumans and inert, incontinent humans escalate suddenly to the full-blown supernatural conceit of the posthumous finale, but no further insight into the human-nonhuman "crossings" of the previous stories follows. The lopsidedly magical progress of Belacqua and the *Policeman* narrator through their lives and afterlives does not allow for any sense to be made or unifying theme to be drawn, consolatory or damning, in regard to what otherwise might seem the significant prospect, from a human point of view, of surviving one's death.

Each work, taken all together, is also lopsided in its proportions of the fantastic: the fantastic afterlife takes up most of *Policeman*, whereas "Echo's Bones" is a much smaller, belated percentage of *More Pricks Than Kicks*, initially not even conceived for the collection. The composition of each emphasizes the unassimilable, irreconcilable nature of the fantastic to human life in these works, albeit by different strategies. As a whole, including "Echo's Bones," *More Pricks Than Kicks* largely ignores and does not comment upon what would seem to be the un-ignorable magic of the events it presents. *Policeman* accentuates this unresolvable presence by depicting humans who alternate between active denial of supernatural events and intense, fruitless, scrutiny that brings them too close to see properly. One response is the apathetic "So it goes in the world," while the other is the doomed attempt to scrutinize the inscrutable by starting with whatever is to hand: "Is it about a bicycle?"

Beckett's "So it goes in the world" can be said to constitute a kind of conclusion, albeit a conclusion that abnegates any hope of insight or agency in favor of simple endurance. On the other hand, the magic of *Policeman* remains disturbing until the end; there is not even the modest relief of

the dismissal offered at the end of "Echo's Bones." Ultimately, magic in *Policeman* cannot be homogenized or codified into orderly meaning for human life, whether that meaning is supernatural or naturalistic. Humans are unable to fully engage with their supernatural world but also unable, however they try, to move on from it and act as if everything is "ordinary." The concluding sentence, Sergeant Pluck's repeated "'Is it about a bicycle?'" would perhaps be no less pertinent a question to ask about the novel than any of the possible allegorical inquiries.

The novel's agentive bicycles are its most opaque fantastic objects of all, resistant even to partial allegorical readings,[32] which end up looking more fanciful than the magic they attempt to explain. It is always about a bicycle, whatever else anyone may claim, and the policemen will not entertain other or more abstract theories, as Pluck smilingly implies to the narrator when the narrator insists that he's searching for a gold watch: "'There was a man[…]telling me he was at the loss of his mother[…]When I asked him for a description[…] he said she had rust on her rims and her back breaks were subject to jerks.'" (*TP* 62) Nor are the policemen particularly curious about the miraculous anthropomorphic properties of parish bicycles; their hands are full with the practical task of stealing and hiding bicycles to prevent citizens from too much riding. In regard to fantastic matters (and fantastic matter), they are both the most knowledgeable humans in the novel and the least interested in or aware of the fact that such matters are fantastic. MacCruiskeen is staggered by the notion that the narrator does not possess a bicycle, a fact he finds much more arresting than his own ineffable inventions. Despite having witnessed multiple cases of humanized bicycles and bicyclized humans, Pluck does not have any metaphysical insights about the nature of reality in the

[32] Kemnitz's attempt to take Pluck at his word and apply "atomic theory" to read the bicycles and the rest of the novel as a unified statement on the atomic age perhaps illustrates this point; while Kemnitz's readings are ingenious, they turn upon infinitesimal details and connections that I find too speculative and too minute within the work as a whole to be convincing, as when a passing mention of "St. Peter's Rome" is read as invoking physicists' use of St. Peter's Cathedral as a blown-up model for conceptualizing the structure of an atom. (Kemnitz, 62)

parish; he is, frankly, too busy protecting parishioners from the immediate, blurring danger of their bicycles and themselves. He lives matter-of-factly in a fantastic world, trying to limit human involvement in supernatural transformations.

The ability of the bicycles in the parish to interact with and even colonize human bodies – a power seemingly confirmed by the narrator's firsthand experience of a sexually charged escape from the police station on a flirty bicycle that seems to move of its (her?) own accord – is, in fact, not supernatural at all for Pluck. He normalizes bicycle behavior by attributing it to "Atomic Theory" and thus writing it off as a natural scientific process, even though his notion of scientific proof is itself unconsciously fantastic, more similar to MacCruiskeen's sublime account of the spear point than a sober empirical conclusion: "'Atomics is a very intricate theorem and can be worked out with algebra but[…]you might spend the whole night proving a bit of it[…]and then at the wind-up not believe what you had proved at all.'" (*TP* 84-85) Like MacCruiskeen's inventions, Pluck's "science" of animate bicycles requires suspension of disbelief without supplying any definite content to believe in the absence. Humans cannot make sense of magical bicycles, and in Pluck's opinion they are best avoiding these usurping machines.

Politics, in a world dominated by a supernatural that humans cannot bring into focus, is understandably scattered and hard to track. Political commentary in the novel on anything outside the parish is limited to vague asides, as when Sergeant Pluck comments smugly on an instance of mob justice that is "'a nice piece of law and order for you, a terrific indictment of democratic self-government, a beautiful commentary on Home Rule.'" (*TP* 159) At this point the narrator is numbly trying to contemplate his impending execution and barely listening. The comment references a now-archaic political debate, as if Pluck, in his obsession with the sexual politics and power struggles of bicycles, is far behind on the news of the free Irish state; the policemen themselves operate under an

archaic job title in a country where police have been known since independence as Garda.[33] The narrator's own sense of politics seems to be limited to having listened as a child to his father's talk of the disgraced Irish home rule champion Parnell, meditations that led only to the assertion that "Ireland was a queer country." If the discussions were current, they place the narrator's childhood somewhere in the 1890's, putting his politics more out of date than Pluck's.

If there is political agency in *Policeman*, it seems to lie in the enchanted matter that surrounds, permeates, and overwhelms the humans of the story, starting with the wooden leg that attaches itself without the help of any apparent outside human agent (no doctor or caretaker is ever mentioned) to the narrator, and in turn unites him with Martin Finnucane and a tribe of wooden-legged men. Agentive material on a grand scale dominates the novel. Omnium, the substance to which every detail of the plot is eventually and inexactly attributed, works through and around human endeavors. Humans who try to play with it as a means to manipulating the world can only temporarily confine omnium's agency (or divert it to their own ends). The narrator is scornful of Policeman Fox's narrow ambitions for omnium as a source of perfectly boiled eggs and jam, and dismisses the "eternity" for which Fox takes credit as "oafish[…]the product of a mind which fed upon adventure books of small boys." (*TP* 190) The omnium-enabled eternity, however, a place where we have seen the narrator tremble, cry, and break down entirely, is more than this, and seems to be more than

[33] Allegory beckons critics here as well. Political readings of the novel have attempted to read its fantastic as a stand-in for politics and world events, with Taaffe writing that in the magical Irish landscapes of *Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, stripped of the sentimental fairy tale affectations of old Irish fantasy, "fantastic is reclaimed from debased traditions and sternly reinjected with a touch of doom." (Taaffe, 79). Modern political Ireland is sinisterly enchanted, giving rise to the "fantastic circumstance" of Ireland's remaining neutral in the Second World War. (Taaffe, 78). Enchantment looks both banal and grim when the "improbability of Ireland had become a reality," and a heroic dream "[dulls] into respectability." (Taaffe, 81). Patrick Nolan reads the text as blending Irish supernatural tradition with new science, arguing that the novel depicts a technological sublime that brings religion back around as apocalyptic visions can finally be realized. Both accounts still center the human, however, as the agentive figure in these banal and deadly reenchantments.

jam-obsessed Fox can appreciate or could ever invent. Moments earlier, a less defensive narrator has told Fox that he thinks "that even the smallest thing that happened there was miraculous." (*TP* 186) His assessment of Fox's abilities is at odds with his affective experience of the underground eternity. Further, he is more right than he knows proclaiming that, omnium in hand, there will be "no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination." That imagination centers around such banal, routine concerns as paying off John Divney to go away, publishing commentaries on his beloved de Selby in fancy bindings, and making himself invisible "every Tuesday." Whatever animates omnium, there seems to be no question that it is not human vision that makes omnium the confounding, unfathomable entity that it is. Political agency may be possible in the *Policeman* world, but it is an unconscious process, nonhuman process; even the human custodians of this power do not know what they do.[34]

This process looks much like Jane Bennett's account of agency in an enchanted world. For Bennett, lack of consciousness does not necessarily preclude agency. In a materially enchanted world where political action is informed by a sense of material enchantment, agency is necessarily "distributed, to varying degrees to atoms[…]plants[…]and animals[…]as well as humans." (Bennett 163) With this is mind, Bennet argues that we should "broaden the sense of what agency means to cover the ability to make a difference in the world without knowing exactly what you are doing."

[34] In his last novel *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Brien explores this bumbling, unknowingly fantastic apocalyptic figure again in a distractible and careless De Selby who turns water to gin, talks to Old Testament figures in an undersea cave, and synthesizes a substance capable of destroying the world, all the while unconcerned about the implications of any of these activities. He then loses interest in all these pastimes before he can even be confronted by the young man who takes his claims seriously and tries unsuccessfully to make transcendent meaning out of them, momentarily believing himself called to join a monastic order when De Selby's watery conversations convince him that the soul is immortal. None of De Selby's miraculous tricks is ever debunked, but the credulous ultimately goes on with his life as usual, quietly dropping these supernatural epiphanies about religion and the nature of human existence.

Notably, however, Bennett's vision, or "onto-tale," seems to recuperate human agency through individualistic humanist terms even as it expands both "human" and "agency." Bennet imagines salutary communions between enchanted nonhumans and humans, an ongoing drill of self-improvement for humans through "repeated acts of discipline and retuning" to notice the "that the natural and cultural worlds *offer gifts* and, in so doing, remind us that it is good to be alive," spurring humans to give, in turn. (156-157) From here a progressivist narrative takes over, and this "disciplinary" process can serve utilitarian aims: by becoming more responsive to other material forms with which one shares space, one can better enact the principle of minimizing harm and suffering." (Bennett 157) The affective sense of collaboration and goodwill seems no less salient to this vision of enchantment than the notion that enchanted agency is distributed; distributed agency seems to imply collaboration. There is a consolatory narrative for humans here, even if human primacy is challenged. *Policeman*, in attuning itself to an enchanted material world, flummoxes human agency altogether. Rather than incorporating it into larger networks, the enchanted material world seems to shut human agency out, to paralyze even human attempts to conceptualize and thereby move in this world. No amount of discipline or routinized practice on the part of humans can help here because these supernatural worlds do not give consistent information to the human sensorium or the human intellect. Brushes with magic do not intimate human transcendence but human limitation.

Chapter Three

The Blasphemous Fantastic: Unorthodox Miracles, Backtalk, and the Mischievous Divine Narrator in *The Satanic Verses* and *Paradise*

The prominent business men of a seventh-century Arabian merchant city cut a canny deal with the self-proclaimed prophet and chief proponent of a new revealed religion. Submission, as the nascent faith is called (Islam), must accept the city's three favorite goddesses. In return, the city will also honor Submission's god, mostly. Blasphemous and contradictory though this accommodation seems for a Submission's strictly monotheistic doctrine, the embattled prophet initially accepts and publicly claims to have had another revelation legitimizing the goddesses. So go the wheelings and dealings of worship in Salman Rushdie's 1988 *The Satanic Verses*, which tells a set of parallel stories including the transfiguration of two modern-day lapsed Indian Muslims into an angel and a devil and a series of flashbacks to the revelation of the Quran in the Mecca-like city of Jahilia.

The flashbacks re-imagine the origins of a Quranic passage, usually dismissed as apocryphal by Muslim believers, that sanctions the concurrent worship of three goddesses alongside Islam's single god. Islamic tradition attributes the passage to a meddling Iblis, or Satan, who briefly fools Muhammad by pretending to be the angel Gibreel revealing the will of God; the stricken passage is typically referred to in Quranic scholarship as the "satanic verses". In the novel, however, Gibreel – actually no angel and an ordinary human being himself, conscripted into divine service – steps in to counter that he delivered the verses in question as well as the rest of the sacred text, helplessly spoken through like a puppet both times by the same divine source. In reneging on the compromise and pronouncing the passage fraudulent, then, Rushdie's Muhammad stand-in Mahound conceals the real nature of the divine entity with whom he is in conversation: capricious, inscrutable. Jahilia's

merchants, calling this god's bluff on monotheism, grasp something about human-divine relations that Mahound does not. Rather than reject supernatural belief altogether, they challenge and attempt to tweak divine mandate.

A similar dispute over sacred text breaks out in Toni Morrison's 1997 *Paradise*, pitting supposed by-the-letter orthodoxy against an approach to divine communion that claims a similar right to negotiate, as if scripture is a contract to be rewritten. At the crescendo of the American black civil rights movement, the all-black midwestern town of Ruby struggles to stay isolated from the turbulent events of the white-run world, a policy that has ensured its survival since the end of slavery. Central to this struggle is a religious debate. Like the Jahilia men who demand a place for their goddesses alongside Mahound's god, Ruby's younger generation does not disbelieve in the town's flinty Christian god but wants to redefine the human-divine relationship, to negotiate better terms for themselves. Where the elders suggest that the proper human relationship to the divine is one of fearful obedience, the young people assert themselves as interpreters divine will and enactors of divine justice: "'[W]e'll be His voice, His retribution.'" To the conservative Reverend Pulliam's objection that "'what they say is more like backtalk than talk,'" a spokesman for the young argues, "'What is talk if it's not 'back'?'"[1] This presumption that a communion with God can, and even must, include "backtalk" to divine revelation suggests a model of human-divine interaction that includes not only transgression but competitive insubordination.

In the concrete but also miracle-dense worlds of *Paradise* and *Satanic Verses*, humans, not just gods, can aspire to wield supernatural power. As supernatural agents, humans inevitably transgress against divine authority: human engagement with the divine and its supernatural world is inherently

[1] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 85-87.Hereafter, quotations from *Paradise* refer to this edition and are cited in-text as *P* with page numbers.

prone to become adversarial and, inasmuch as it means challenging divine authority, sinful. For the people of Ruby, this sometimes-unintended "'blasphemy'" (*P* 86) is not the purview of only the young. The novel opens with the murders of a group of women living in a convent outside the town, murders committed by the town fathers in the belief that, in killing these suspected blasphemers and witches, they act with "God at their side." The chapters that follow probe this framing moral thesis as if collating evidence and testimony. In sections, each headed as if honorarily with a female character's name, the narrator sifts the deep history of the event from parallel characters' vantage points, starting from the community's inception after the American Civil War and moving upward to the 1970's, when the blighted town fractures irrevocably over the murders. Sometimes the narrative lingers on a given figure; sometimes it jumps from one to another quickly. The narrating voice is removed from the action and turbulent affects of the town, betraying little partisanship, but knowing as any insider, looking in on Ruby patriarchs, rebels, and misfits, as well as the outsider women and the traumas that have brought them to the Convent. The novel concludes with the mysterious disappearance of the victims' bodies from the Convent grounds, and a series of epilogues that depict them alive and at peace. The moral audit of the events and their fallout is harrowing but veiled by the apparently fantastic intervention that gives the town – murderers and whistleblowers – and the women apparent resolutions, if not happy endings.

Caught up in this divine-human power jockeying are, in both novels, humans forced into unwilling and therefore often irreverent, backtalking service to the divine that means simultaneous communion and blasphemy. Affable Bollywood actor and would-be apostate Gibreel Farishta constantly attempts to shrug off divine obligation and literally talks back, often profanely, to it. Consolata Sosa, one of the convent women and a devout childhood convert to Catholicism, is told that her power to inhabit and revive the bodies of the dying is a gift from God, but the ability tortures her conscience by "yoking the sin of pride to witchcraft." (*P* 247) Like Gibreel, she is

divinely endowed with magical powers she cannot give up and must use. Unlike Gibreel, whose transgressions and "backtalk" are deliberate, she genuinely wants to serve God but cannot help wondering if God Himself has made this impossible with his "satanic gift." (*P* 248) The thought is paradoxically anxiously pious and yet blasphemous in the same way as Gibreel: both characters find themselves attributing "satanic" possibilities to God.

This chapter explores a narrative mode I call the blasphemous fantastic. The divine, manifesting through miracles of ambiguous significance, is a concrete presence in these contemporary novels and plays a real role in late-twentieth-century human life; God is not dead. However, blasphemy is a recurrent motif of that relationship. Human engagement with the divine is a contentious, irreverent negotiation, and in turn the divine is portrayed blasphemously as fickle and even sadistic in the inscrutability of its will and moral system. Divine revelation is never goes only one way: divine commands breed bargaining, muttered asides, suspicion, and truculence. There is always "backtalk" or, to borrow from Rushdie influence Flann O'Brien, "backchat." Faith persists, but it is often bad faith. Further, where there is religion, there is also unorthodox, unsanctioned magic. In these novels, I argue, magic is an inevitable improvisation upon religion and the always-ambiguous experience of the divine, a blasphemy that humans cannot help committing even when they are just trying to pray. It is the space where humans negotiate for control, sometimes tensely, with the divine, and feel out the limits of miraculous agency. It constitutes a political realm in which both human and divine beings interact as agents. Humans vie with the divine in the arena of magic and revelation, and it is not entirely clear where power will end up.

This chapter spends particular time on blasphemous narrative style and personae as a constituting feature of the mode and its blasphemy. Both novels, I argue, are narrated by voices that wield creative, not just descriptive, power over the narratives, as well as moral authority. These

narrative voices convey moral judgment toward the events of the novel and toward readers and readings of the novel as well. Accordingly, I argue that both these narrators can be read as divine entities who interact with readers and characters alike, calling the story into being and participating as characters themselves within it. "Divine" here means a nonhuman, supernatural agent with putative moral and creative authority over humans. Both divine narrators emerge as capricious, even sadistic beings with little concern for humans as individuals, tricksters who deliberately tempt human characters and readers alike to transgress and then indict them. Told by way of this presumptuous and irreverent portrayal of the divine, the narratives perform blasphemy as well as thematizing it. In these novels and the real-world discourse and events that have arisen in connection with them, blasphemy is the mode by which the twentieth-century fantastic engages with the divine on multiple diegetic levels. Blasphemy is a broken and damning but vital form of religious and magical practice.

Challenging to secular and religious paradigms alike, the blasphemous fantastic allows a concrete and irreverent accounting for and consideration of the divine and its manifestation in human politics and communities. I argue that blasphemy provides this opportunity because, while it hybridizes different belief and knowledge systems, talking back to authorities on all sides and thus making itself antithetical to orthodox views of the divine, it does not fall along the spectrum of disenchantment as secular doubt does. Such an account is necessary and necessarily fuller than a solely secular historical account. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his critique of Eurocentric historicism, the formulaic Marxist timeline of the evolution of capital that Western historians project onto cultures and communities outside the West is an ill-fitting model. It occludes historical (or as Chakrabarty terms it, "antihistorical") experience in insisting that secularism can and must fully account for sociopolitical realities. Chakrabarty argues for attending to the divine and the supernatural in considerations of the sociopolitical, contending that, in India for example, "nonsecular supernatural exists in proximity to the secular" and is not a sign that "political

modernity[…]has remained 'incomplete.'"[2] Secular historicizing abusively universalizes histories, generalizing and dismissing the supernatural as mysticism, "a procedure that subordinates these narratives to the rules of evidence and to the secular, linear calendar," rendering the "antihistorical, antimodern subject" voiceless "within the knowledge procedures" of academic historicism.[3]

This chapter extends Chakrabarty's argument to Western and hybrid cultures such as the transnational, postcolonial world of *Satanic Verses* and the fractured, racially polarized United States of *Paradise*. Here, conventional Western historicism vies with a plurality of other ways to narrativize history, grounded variously in spiritual belief, folk tradition, and newly recognized timelines of the nonhuman and nonliving. Such narrative hybridity is increasingly present everywhere in an age of mobility and migration, and I argue that these novels constitute innovations in historical imagining that mobilize and then transcend narrow secular and orthodox religious hermeneutics alike to better approximate the intermixed fantastic and banal factors that produce rational and irrational events. Such historical imagining is inherently blasphemous. The narratives that come out of this innovation do not generalize about the supernatural as secular historicizing does, but they inevitably transgress against supernatural orthodoxies because they deploy and interrogate multiple belief and knowledge systems. As a result, this is not always a peaceful communion. In the novels and even in real life, as in the case of the Iranian *fatwa* or death sentence on Salman Rushdie for the blasphemy of *Satanic Verses*, blasphemous fantastic narrative is frequently confrontational and its fantastic effects are often destructive. The presence of the supernatural divine is not denied, but its authority is challenged, producing a situation arguably more volatile than mere secularization.

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[2] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 15.
[3] Chakrabarty, 40-41.

In addition to spanning the divide between the secular and non-secular and putting this binary into question, the blasphemous fantastic is a narrative mode that incorporates, deploys, and subverts postmodern and traditional realist narrative strategies and tropes, confounding these taxonomies as well. Blasphemous fantastic narrative produces both readerly attempts to discern the "real" and a formal game of a sort. *Satanic Verses* and *Paradise* subvert the postmodern vitiation of truth values in narrative that Tzvetan Todorov claims makes the fantastic obsolete after the nineteenth century. Having moved beyond nineteenth-century positivism, Todorov says, readers stop trying to differentiate between what is "real" and unreal within a text: narrative undergoes an interpretative flattening whereby all aspects of it are simply text, without a truth value.[4] *The Satanic Verses* and *Paradise*, however, both continue to encourage attempts to consider the "reality" of ambiguous fantastic events and decode truth even as they playfully evoke postmodern sensibilities.

We access the story in both novels by way of a narrator that hints at its own divinity. Both gesture at a power over the story that is creative, not just descriptive, and teasingly invite the reader to make sense of this reality as they shift it. Materiality in these novels has the logic-defying mutability of text because their material realms are subject to (equally material) supernatural forces. Material realities here can be composed and rewritten by multiple supernatural hands, and the writers or composers can and do interact with their creations through revelation, apparition, and miracle. As a result, these contradictions and interventions do not necessarily emphasize their own textuality, since they represent conceivable real events within this particular narrative world and thus do not break the illusion of the story. Further, the narratives are themselves preoccupied with the composition of texts that have shaping power over narrative reality: both novels can be read as dealing with the material effects of a text that ostensibly reveals divine will and nature.

[4] Todorov, 168.

Hence, what seems at first to be the familiar and indeed somewhat shopworn postmodern narrative conceit of a self-aware author narrator, whose presence emphasizes the text as a text in the process of composition and disrupts readerly immersion in the fictional reality,[5] is actually what Roland Barthes would call a "reality effect."[6] This self-aware narrator has an enchanting function opposed to, but also co-present with, the disenchanting effect usually attributed to such metatextual ploys. The narrator is literally, not just metaphorically, a god; when the more outspoken god-narrator of *Satanic Verses* alludes to his own omniscience and omnipotence, both must be regarded as plot points. Such narratorial innuendo may activate the reader's awareness of textuality, but the very traits that might encourage readerly divestment in the "truth" of the story also plunge the reader deeper into considering that truth and its stakes.

In examining the stakes that attend blasphemy as a religious practice in twentieth-century fiction, I make use of and build upon the work of John McClure on the post-secular, and Amy Hungerford on the related phenomenon of "postmodern belief". Both critics have produced critical work on mid- and late-twentieth-century literature that takes up the problem of religious and more generally numinous encounters in a supposedly secular age. I argue that the novels I read here align with the readings of Hungerford and McClure in depicting demanding, irrepressible numinous worlds that secularism refuses to map. In distinction to these critics, I contend that these novels do not offer narratives of consolation or reconciliation to be had through numinous communion.

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[5] Brian Richardson (*Unnatural Narrative*) calls this technique "framebreaking," and attributes it to a number of the writers and texts discussed here as fantastic, including Rushdie and Flann O'Brien. While Richardson characterizes such novels as "antimimetic," I argue that the strategy of self-aware narrator is not necessarily framebreaking in twentieth-century fantastic novels, because the narrator can be, as Rushdie's narrator is, a divine or supernatural being with the power to compose the world like a text and to defy human logic by making contradictory principles operate at once.

[6] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141.

Moreover, I maintain that the supernatural-human encounters in these novels are not neutrally suggestive but at times openly acrimonious.

Hungerford and McClure imagine belief without the possibility of blasphemy. In McClure's notion of "partial faiths," and Hungerford's similar characterization of "postmodern belief," doctrine need not be specified and indeed may be improvised upon,[7] and ultimately doesn't matter that much either way: postmodern belief is "belief without content," in Hungerford's words.[8] The divine and its exact dimensions are comfortably uncertain, an uncertainty that causes no consternation for those mortals who have brushes with it. The believers and the community that they come to constitute are more clearly realized than the nebulous divine entity with which they may be in touch. In contrast, while the blasphemous fantastic is also characterized by an impossibility of clear doctrine and orthodoxy, the inevitable departures from orthodoxy and absolute faith are attended by distress, communal strife, and a sense of trespass, for which the individual and the community may be punished. Characters grapple here with supernatural truth claims and supernatural forces that demand absolute commitment doctrinally speaking but, in practice, are at best only partially able to compel it from followers, who stray, rationalize, and differ on doctrinal interpretation.

The sociopolitical stakes of the blasphemous fantastic are, as a result, both less communally salutary than Hungerford and McClure suggest, and harder to perceive *as* sociopolitical because blasphemous fantastic politics extend political subjecthood to nonhumans including divine and supernatural entities, beings usually assumed to transcend human politics. Much concern about the

[7] John McClure, *Partial Beliefs: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 7-8.
[8] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), xiv and 21-22.

supposedly neutralizing effect of magic on politics has been expressed in critical work on Rushdie and Morrison alike. McCann and Szalay claim that Morrison and Rushdie discredit concrete political action in favor of mysticism, while John McClure disputes this by playing down the prominence of magical events in their texts, a defense that seems to concede the point about magic as inherently "mystical," escapist.[9] Meanwhile, arguments in favor of the political weight of work by Rushdie and Morrison frequently take their respective novels' "ambivalence"[10] as a stopping point, a political position in itself achieved by suspending the worlds of the novels undecidably between familiar binaries of east-west, secular-sacred, magical-realist.[11]

Critical assessments of Rushdie's and Morrison's political import tend to touch on the presence of magic only to assign magic a secular political value in terms of the usual left-right axis. I maintain that such attempts to recruit the miracles of the blasphemous fantastic to one side or another obscure its true political dimensions.[12] While Wendy Faris and other critics have suggested

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[9] Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, "Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 447.
John McClure, "Do They Believe in Magic? Politics and Postmodern Literature," *boundary 2* 36, no. 2: 129-130.

[10] See, for instance, Ursula Kluwick, *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 169-181.

[11] Cataloguing and effectively reinforcing these binaries tends to preoccupy critics who work on magical realism, particularly on Rushdie and particularly on *Satanic Verses*, which critics often take at its word as a battle between good and evil when, in fact, the novel is conspicuous in its attempts to confound such dualities. See Wendy Faris (*Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*), Ursula Kluwick (cf. note 7), Srinivas Aravamudan ("Being God's Postman is No Fun, Yaar"), M. Keith Booker ("Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie"), Pierre François (Salman Rushdie's Philosophical Materialism in *The Satanic Verses*"), and Sara Suleri ("Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the Embodiment of Blasphemy"). Even when they admit to Rushdie's tendency to confound binaries and introduce ambiguity around questions of good and evil, these critics tend to read the novel's ending as a conventional comedic return to order, sense, and reason, with various worlds settling back within their accustomed boundaries. Many also impose various allegorical readings upon the novel, often producing accounts of the work as a statement on imperialism, Islam, religion, philosophical approaches, and so on.

[12] In addition to Faris, see, for instance, Susan Neal Mayberry, whose *Can't I Love What I Criticize?* examines a range of Morrison's novels to claim that black masculinity in Morrison is "celebrated." Mayberry's characterization of *Paradise*'s "not so bad guys" is particularly jarring in light of the

that "magical realist" works, among which they include *The Satanic Verses* and *Paradise*, characteristically incorporate a progressive, liberating communal politics, supernatural elements here are in fact just as likely to tug back toward reactionary forces, from fundamentalist Islam to patriarchal misogyny to surveillance-state control. Humans themselves do not necessarily experience blasphemy as liberating. In *The Satanic Verses*, the legacy of uncompromising, monotheistic, authoritative religion weighs upon characters who draw divine attention more strongly when they try to shake its claims through broad irreverence. In *Paradise*, unwelcome alternative, anarchic, irreverent numinous experiences break in upon conscious-wracked characters who aspire to hew to the authoritative model, while more free-spirited spiritual seekers are sometimes made to look simply irresponsible or mad.

Political subjecthood is drastically reorganized by the blasphemous fantastic. The divine is palpable here as one such political subject, neither above politics nor merely a rhetorical point for manipulation by humans. Its presence means that a secular view of twentieth-century politics is incomplete, but so too, inevitably, is any orthodox supernatural account. For humans in these novels

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murders committed by the characters on the first page of the novel, and their overall portrayal as rigid, sexist, and parochial. Though these characteristics are certainly not all that there is to them, and there is complexity, ambiguity, and variation between individual men in the novel, it still reads as if Mayberry has been taken in in the way that Misner, freethinking but ultimately limited (able to see "a window" and not a "door" at the end of the novel) as Michael Wood writes, "thinks he is analyzing the mentality of the town but really he is converting it into a place he likes better." Such tendentious uses of Rushdie and Morrison (see also Pierre François' reading of *Satanic Verses* as an unequivocal dismissal of religion: "Remove God, and the Rushdiean *oeuvre* of the confrontational nurture that is so congenial to the satirical grain in Rushdie's nature.") notably produce misrepresentations even simply of the plot of these novels in much critical work.

Pierre François, "Salman Rushdie's Philosophical Materialism in *The Satanic Verses*," in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. M.D. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 318.
Susan Neal Mayberry, *Can't I Love What I Criticize?: The Masculine and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) 225.
Michael Wood, "Sensations of Loss" in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 120.

who seek political agency as individuals or in the aggregate, faith in divine will is a powerful source of political momentum and affective solidarity, but such organization can also set a community up for absolute fragmentation. The blasphemous fantastic produces a fallout that often means destruction and violence for these communities, and while the characters occasionally seem connected by a radical intersubjectivity, they are seldom able to recognize it or use it to their advantage.

While other critics have concluded by pronouncing the magical and numinous encounters of these novels politically "ambivalent," I suggest "irreverent" is a more useful and more active characterization that expresses what this narrative style *does* and suggests a route past the political impasse constituted by "ambivalence." Its effects go beyond passively juxtaposing versions of events and worldviews and declining to privilege one or the other, compelling the reader to entertain the disruptive notion of a mundane, profaned, but real divine. At the center of this irreverence is the insouciant god-narrator who diabolically tempts characters into transgression, and even sometimes seems to goad readers into irreverent or transgressive readings. *The Satanic Verses* sees the divine pursue characters who would just as soon be left alone in the secular existences they have tried to choose; the resultant chafing between the calls of the numinous and its unsuccessfully secular defectors produces the blasphemous fantastic realm. Supernatural religious engagement in *Paradise* draws even the would-be faithful into spaces of blasphemy that challenge divine authority. While blasphemous fantastic moments of *The Satanic Verses* are framed in the text as acts willful rebellion against the divine, the blasphemous fantastic seeps into the religious practices of the *Paradise* characters in spite of their anxious identification with orthodox belief.

"His bloody dream": Counter-Narrating the Divine in The Satanic Verses

From the start, Rushdie's maybe-divine speaker flexes his narratorial muscles over the story as if to demonstrate his total creative power over the proceedings but also prevent readers from dismissing their reality. He calls out the impossibility of apparent supernatural events, a practice that may momentarily disrupt the story but ultimately serves to affirm the events as literal and dispute their impossibility. His addresses to the reader emphasize contradictions and irrationalities only to insist upon them rather than introduce doubt; instead of standing apart from the story-world and enabling the reader to distance him or herself by proxy, the narrator is a fully engaged figure within it. The novel opens with a leisurely conversation between Gibreel and Chamcha as they plummet earthward after their airplane explodes, undergoing at the same time the physical transformations that will leave Gibreel haloed and Chamcha horned and hooved. The moment is not just flamboyantly fantastic but almost aggressively silly as well: clutching each other, Gibreel and Chamcha descend with comic flailing, Gibreel singing a vapid song in celebration of his cultural hybridity and Chamcha countering with "Rule Britannia," more annoyed by Gibreel's chipper energy than frightened by their circumstances. Such a moment might encourage readers to abandon a literal interpretation of events entirely, reading the scene and ensuing story as parable or pure fantasy, or else rationalizing it as a mere dream sequence or hallucination. The song choices might seem to point toward an allegorical reading of the two men and their predicament; the comics aspects soften the horror of the situation. Notably, the narrator is at his most conspicuous in this moment of potential readerly doubt, rationalization, or even frustration, heading off any interpretative attempt to discount the scene or reframe it in logical terms:

> Let's face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how

could they? But let's face this, too: They did.[13]

Momentarily sympathizing with the reader's disbelief and affecting a rhetorical complicity, the narrator seems to feint at building a case against the literality of the scene, only to abruptly provide a stark affirmation that he cajoles the skeptical reader to "face," as if blocking a readerly impulse to turn away in fear or even shame. The implication is that the story remains true whether one faces it or shies away; it is a text that claims to have an objective truth value, however anachronistic or meaningless a postmodern lens might deem such a claim. The narrator treats the miracle matter-of-factly, but he also, paradoxically, draws particular attention to it. For a moment, a reader struggling to reconcile the bizarre events with a realist view of the world is relieved by the narrator's sensible assessment of the situation's impossibility; the narrator makes a show of mundane reasonability in terms of what he expects his listener to accept. Then, with a slightly sadistic relish, he shrugs off reason and calmly restates his first claim, as if it has been reinforced and not weakened by his momentary acknowledgment of readerly doubt. Skepticism is given a voice only to be rendered impotent, however compelling the debunkings and arguments it can offer, against the say-so of this cocksure speaker.

The narrator repeatedly indulges in this sort of power-tripping bravado, stopping the action, inviting the reader to reflect upon the narrative's impossibility, and seeming to offer a choice not to believe it, only to announce that there is really no choice here: the scene described is impossible, *and* it happened. He details the further magic at work in the fall in the same gentle but unrelentingly concrete terms, backing the characters' clearly supernatural "angelicdevilish[…]processes of[…]transmutation" with a resuscitated naturalist hypothesis:

[13] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, reprint ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), 6. Hereafter, quotations from *The Satanic Verses* refer to this edition and are cited in-text as *SV* with page numbers.

> Mutation?
>
> Yessir, but not random. Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic – because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible – wayupthere, at any rate, changes took place in delirious actors that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.

As in the passage cited above, the narrative is halted here by the narrator, who turns directly and solicitously toward the reader ("Yessir") to provide an apparent space for critical analysis. The momentum and confusion of the fall, captured in multiple paragraphs of complicated, long sentences that seem to accelerate and push words and names together – "Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha" – might sweep the reader along unresistingly, but the narrator arrests the run-on motion of his own narrative and risks squandering a willing reader's suspension of disbelief by stepping in obtrusively again with the single-word paragraph "Mutation?" a question that seems to anticipate a skeptical reader's attempt at clarification. Again, however, rather than truly allowing the reader a moment to pause and shake off the immersive rhythm of the story-world, the narrator uses this apparent narrative slack tide to reaffirm the emerging carnivalesque scene as reality. The pace picks up again with a cascade of adjectives that re-enchant the sky despite its colonization by modern travel and warfare: "insecure[…]transitory[…]illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic." Beyond reclaiming the sky as a supernatural, divine zone, "the heavens" established in the novel's first sentence (*SV* 3), he subsumes within that supernatural zone the scientific, supposedly rationalistic paradigm that has enabled human presence there. Mechanical flight and human presence in the sky are no longer evidence of disenchantment and conquered natural and supernatural worlds; instead the narrator implies that these scientific innovations have enabled an irrational, magical sequence of events.

If the "planet-[shrinking]" technology realized through the application of scientific principles has "made possible by the century and[…]made the century possible," we are led to reconsider what else is possible in this century. Science and technology have rendered twentieth-century reality not hard and definite but "soft, imperceptible," a time when the unthinkable has become thinkable, where merely surfing through television channels leaves Saladin Chamcha with "a severe dent in what remained of his idea of the normal, average quality of the real," (*SV* 420) and "metamorphic" possibilities range from grotesque to tragic to redemptive. The narrator completes this casual, conversational realignment of technology and scientific evidence by vindicating the evolutionary theory of "old Mr Lamarck," bolstering the fantastic transformations he describes with a long-discounted theory that we must remember, despite its fantastical touches, was nonetheless regarded as scientific in its day. He invites a questioning, scientific interrogation of the scene only to deploy it in the service of the fantastic.

Indeed, in addition to raising and denying practical objections, the narrator calls out other anti-fantastic arguments in order to flatly dismiss them. Having put the material objections to the fantastic scene behind him, he turns to dismantling rhetorical attempts to neutralize it. Given the prevalence of the "fall" as an image in Western literature and religion, a workable allegorical reading of any literary "fall" is not far out of reach. Such a reading would permit readers to tame the scene's unsettling blend of miraculous and ridiculous with a figurative gloss. Rather than sanction a figurative reading, the narrator highlights it as lazy in its reliance on hackneyed literary tropes, and even racist: "Just two brown men, falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun, is that it? That's not it. Listen:" (*SV* 6) The old narrative motif of an overweening Icarus, a human victim fallen to his own hubristic belief that technological artifice can approximate a fantastic transformation and grant him godlike powers, is expressly rejected. Indeed, the narrator has just made an argument that technologically enabled

flight can reopen the heavens to humans, making the twentieth century a time of amorphous enchantment and previously impossible transformation.

These various rejections of skepticism and confirmations of the supernatural also serve to establish the narrative as blasphemous, not just fantastic. Rushdie makes God an unavoidable, definite presence in the novel, allowing the divine to speak for itself, but he forces his god-narrator to speak unorthodoxly; this is a God-resembling entity who slanders and discredits himself, making admissions that bely his own supposed revelations, and one whose ultimate nature is left pointedly ambiguous. Lording over this fantastically inconsistent, destructive world, Rushdie's narrator impugns himself as unreliable and unconcerned by the fantastic changeability of the world he presumes to dominate. His doctrinal inconsistency over time and his markedly intermittent presence in and, by his own admission, only intermittent investment in human affairs casts doubt on his intentions and his nature. Increasingly, the narrator portrays himself as a negligent deity, less engaged with human believers not because he is a transcendent, Enlightenment-style god but because he is guided, like a human, by passing interests and foibles, including a perverse taste for withholding absolute truth. He is quick to disavow any obligation to his characters or his readers, whom he addresses as a single body, all looking for revelation:

> I'm saying nothing. Don't ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. The rules of Creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll. Where's the pleasure if you're always intervening to give hints, change the rules, fix the fights? Well, I've been pretty self-controlled up to this point and I don't plan to spoil things now. Don't think I haven't wanted to butt in; I have, plenty of times. And once, it's true, I did.
>
> *SV* 423

By his own admission, this god is inconstant and cavalier. Part of his reluctance to intervene is not because of any will or grand plan for his creations but because he simply needs a diversion, and there is more "pleasure" in leaving the outcome to chance and watching humans' catastrophic stumbles. He is, contrary to his devout believers' professions of his "'eternity[…]timelessness'" (*SV*

217), aimlessly mercurial, implying here that he has changed his mind and approach over time: "once," he says, he was more hands-on, but not now.

Further, in addition to portraying an irresponsible, callous, and even somewhat petulant divine, this god's inconstancy and lack of concern invite suspicion regarding the true extent of his power. The narrative initiates a sort of compulsory blasphemy for its readers. Like the Jahilians who initially accept Mahound's revelations while still doubting the absolute supremacy Mahound imputes to Allah, and like the disciples who come to question Allah's supremacy and nature as the revelations change over time, the reader is led toward a distrust of the narrator's power and legitimacy within the story-world. This distrust is inherently blasphemous rather than secularly skeptical because we are still compelled to believe in the narrator's divinity if we are to follow the narrative he relates. To read the novel is to believe and profane at the same time. While he does not state explicitly that his power is restricted, he seems to unwittingly reveal himself as subject to a number of internal and external limits. With the disavowal of the Icarus allegory, an allegory that illustrates the failure and punishment of human insubordination against the divine, the divine's position in this narrative world is shown to be a murkily defined, if not outright insecure. Despite the fact that God himself is ostensibly voicing this irreducibly fantastic narrative, the narrative signals from the start that its fantastic events will not be neatly mappable as typological expressions of divine authority. Not all the miraculous occurrences here will serve to confirm or celebrate the narrator's creative power, even as he repeatedly insists that he knows and controls everything about the story he tells. Although in the passage cited above he claims the creative authority of having "set things up," he muddies the authoritative waters by suggesting that there are "rules of Creation" by which he is himself bound and his interventions restrained. He goes on to assess himself as "pretty self-controlled," suggesting a humanlike gap between ideal behavior and his own natural inclinations, and an inability to exercise total dominance over his own thoughts and actions; he can make

mistakes, and be drawn into human dramas in spite of himself. His stonewalling when it comes to explaining himself ("I'm saying nothing") begins to seem at least possibly due to an ignorance he is trying to conceal, a lack of knowledge rather than a deliberate reticence.

The narrator's own coy introduction of himself leaves room for the possibility that he is a mere blaspheming impostor, the worship and service of whom is thus an unwitting blasphemy on the part of the characters he torments and makes demands upon. At the literal and figurative height of the novel's first scene, when a passenger jet splits apart, the narrator interrupts this moment of action as if in response to another anticipated skeptical readerly objection to ask "Who am I?" and answers "Who else is there?" The rest of the novel will leave no doubt that neither of these are safely rhetorical questions, given that the central controversy within the story and later the source of the real-world blasphemy charge is the suggestion that, despite Submission's doctrinal insistence on monotheism – a "blasphemy" itself when first propounded, as the narrator points out – there may in fact be multiple divine entities, any of whom might be witnessing this explosion that no human could witness and survive. Apparently blasphemous god-impersonation is practiced and to some degree legitimized as well, with Gibreel embodying multiple deities onscreen from across faiths, regarded by Hindu audiences as literally divine himself during the time that he plays Ganesh or Rama; in pretending to be a god, he becomes one in the eyes of many believers.

In a twist that at once seems to be a send-up of postmodern authorial self-referencing and an insistently concrete, insistently blasphemous moment of magic, the narrator's description of the moment when Gibreel Farishta "saw God" contains a preponderance of mundane, concrete detail that violates prohibitions against confining deities to set physical properties; depicts a particularly limited, unprepossessing deity at that; and bears a striking resemblance to Rushdie himself:

> […]Gibreel's vision of the Supreme Being was not abstract in the least. He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium

> height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected.

Rushdie unapologetically casts himself as a god here. The obvious humorous allegorical reading of the moment is that Rushdie is indeed creator of Gibreel and arbiter of his fate, and the moment imagined here is a typically postmodern confrontation between character and author. However, this allegorical interpretation does not dominate the scene. It is important to the plot that this is a moment of actual divine vision for Gibreel, not just a metatextual joke for reader and author. In a follow-up paragraph of grand cosmic claims where the god-narrator voice reemerges conspicuously to opine on the "rules of Creation" and tout his own power to change things, he cites the scene with Gibreel, in all its concrete detail, as an example of a time he intervened: "I sat on Alleluia Cone's bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel." (*SV* 423) The apparition is at once a postmodern wink and a blasphemous god-impersonation that becomes real within the world of the novel.

The single god's unity is further challenged, and challenged most blasphemously, with the intimation that this god doubles as Satan, source of the titular verses but also of all the other verses as well – "*me both times*," in Gibreel's horrified admission, "*me first and second also me*. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked." (*SV* 126) The supernatural narrator who "works" Gibreel's mouth, may in fact be no ordinary blaspheming pretender but the Great Impostor himself, behind a novel that contains multiple impersonations, impostors, and voices of indeterminate origin. The suggestion that God and Satan are one being is reinforced with the apparition on the bed of the unremarkable-looking personage who ostensibly "works" the mouth that for Gibreel merely "got worked." The scene of course serves as a reminder for the reader that Rushdie himself works all the mouths, but that reminder does not upstage the scene's principle

function as a characterizing moment for the narrator-god who governs the world of the novel. The narrator, here "the apparition," initially gives an answer to "Who am I?" when Gibreel demands to know: "'Ooparvala[…]The Fellow Upstairs.'" However, when Gibreel presses him, objecting, "'How do I know you're not the other One[…]Neechayvala, the Guy from Underneath?'" the apparition grows both "snappish" at this blasphemous inquiry and also qualifies his previous answer: "'We are not obliged to explain Our nature to you[…]Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* and *Neechay*, or whether we be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here.'" (*SV* 329) The narrator does not soften this suggestion that that there is more than one "One," a "One" and an "other" at least. He declines to clarify his nature in the moment of direct address to the reader where he reaffirms his appearance to Gibreel. He repeats his refusal to the reader when Gibreel's counterpart Saladin Chamcha wonders to himself whether there is any distinction among humans, angels, and devils. Here the narrator preemptively interrupts, a little defensively, "I'm saying nothing[…]*Ooparvala* or *Neechayvala*, [Gibreel] wanted to know, and I didn't enlighten him; I certainly don't intend to blab to this confused Chamcha instead." (*SV* 423) With his unpunctuated repetition of "*One one one*" in the face of blasphemy charges, it seems that Mahound's devoutly monotheistic disciple Bilal may have unwittingly given voice to the real divine nature operating in the novel: multiple incommensurable Ones, paradoxically each claiming ascendancy, incapable of being added together or subsumed into a single One. As a response to the question "Who else is there?", "One one one" is suspended undecidably between orthodoxy and blasphemy. The narrator makes claims about himself that may be blasphemous, and beckons the reader into at least theoretical blasphemy as well.

Blasphemous Divine Narrative in Morrison

Morrison's blasphemous narrative approach in *Paradise* works more subtly than Rushdie's in that no overt persona declares itself as a god-narrator. Much less does a narrator explicitly take credit for the text's apparent miracles or intrude upon the narrative to vouch for their truth as Rushdie's narrator does. Nonetheless, the entity who narrates *Paradise* is still something more potent and more obtrusive than the conventional omniscient narrator for which it might be mistaken. As a representation of the divine, it is in a sense further from orthodox notions of the divine than the irreverent intermittent "I" that manifests within the world of Rushdie's novel because it is less anthropomorphized and resists addressing the reader directly; this divine is engaged in the human world but humans as such may not be its principle concern. Like Rushdie's narrator, the *Paradise* narrator gradually establishes itself not just as an observing eye but a creative and authoritative power with the capacity to intervene in both the narrative and the reader's understanding thereof.

Paradise's narrator is a blasphemous divine voice, first, because the narrator describes the novel's characters and frames its events in distinctly nonhuman, non-individualistic and omniscient terms that suggest a god's-eye vantage point. This presumption to narrate as a god is itself arguably blasphemous, as is the depiction of this god as unconcerned with singular human souls as such in Judeo-Christian terms. Secondly, the narrating voice registers as divine but unorthodoxly so. The resulting novel resembles a text of divine revelation in several key ways, so that it reads like a reworking of the Bible handed down by a rogue, competing divine revelator. A morally and cosmologically authoritative voice incorporates but frequently challenges or travesties Biblical motifs. This voice introduces miraculous occurrences only to accompany them with alternative mundane explanations voiced by characters, as if trying to tempt readers and characters alike away from accepting miracles on faith with their mystery intact. This complex attitude of moralistic evaluation and instruction that the narrator conveys toward reader and characters reinforces the mischievous resemblance to scripture. As in a sacred revealed text, there are moral implications to

the supernatural events of the novel and their interpretation from the opening section's cryptic "God at their side, the men take aim." The narrating voice orients itself in authoritative moral terms toward the humans it speaks of and to. It is a voice that by turns impugns and absolves characters and readers not just for their actions but for what is in their hearts and minds, their interpretation of the narrative, and even seems set up to test them. The novel performs an excavation of the factors that precede its opening crime. The post-emancipation wandering of Ruby's founding families after other black settlements reject them for their dark skin evokes the nativity story and Exodus, as do the wanderings of the women who variously flee abandonment, rape, trouble with the law, and tragic loss and by instinct seem to arrive at the Convent. Ruby's authoritarian "town fathers," its quietly skeptical women, its open rebels, and the Convent women all come under scrutiny.

The divine *Paradise* narrator knows hearts and minds, but the glimpses it provides into the novel's characters are often more cryptic than illuminating. Rather than offer psychological realist portraits of individual psyches, they reveal seemingly impossible, unless supernatural, psychic connections between minds. Rather than giving readers a view into each different character's heads in turn like a conventional omniscient narrator, this narrator's omniscience is of an agglomerative kind, working against a sense of absolute distinction or individuality between characters and instead presenting the Ruby community and even its outliers as a single, if conflicted, subjective entity. While these characters might experience themselves as separate individuals, the narrator does not perceive them as such. The novel resists attempts to parse it in terms of individual consciousnesses. Michael Wood points out that Morrison's narrators often seem to inhabit several minds at once, so that "several[…]competing knowledges" operate within a single narrative moment, which may be inflected by the sensibilities or diction of multiple characters, their direct thoughts, an "authorial" point of view, or an authorial paraphrase of a character's thoughts in language unavailable to the

character.[14] In *Paradise*, he points out, the foreboding vision of "feathers" in one woman's dream seem to come from the same "'feathered thing, undead,'" that serves as a metaphor of liberation for the mistress of the first woman's husband" "[S]he can know only through telepathy, or the echoing magic of fiction, that she and the other women meet up in their imagery."[15] These and other resonances of diction and imagery across the text intimate a shared subjective world, a common consciousness that flows like an aquifer under the entire town.

In Wood's sketch of this telepathic narratorial economy, however, the underlying perspective remains unaccounted for. While Wood seems to assume that words and sentiments not easily attributable to characters are "authorial," he acknowledges too that there are moments when an ab extra point of view seems to intrude that is harder to identify and, in Wood's assessment, morally alien to author, characters, and readers alike: a character whom we are "right to see" as "a cold-blooded killer" nonetheless has "'innocent eyes,'" leaving Wood to ask, "Who sees his eyes this way?" I contend that the missing "who" is an inscrutable nonhuman divine perspective. Wood's best guess is that the "narrator is reporting generalized community views," but he concludes only that this moment of moral dissonance is one more of the paradoxical "difficult formulations in Morrison's work."[16] I suggest that the difficulty and paradox of this moment comes from its inscrutable but authoritative moral inflection, hinting at a divine perspective inaccessible to any human character or reader and at odds with human notions of the divine.

This perspective may give access to a shared communal subjectivity, but a communal subjectivity that only the observing narrator can perceive, unavailable and alien to the human characters themselves. The inaccessibility of this perspective is evident from the emotional and

[14] Wood, 115-166.
[15] Wood, 119-120.
[16] Wood, 119.

mental isolation the characters frequently feel from one another: most of the time, they think they're alone in their heads, an assumption undercut by the narrator through the unconscious resonances across minds that Wood points out. This is not the only way in which the narrator seems to systematically undermine the characters' instincts about the degree and nature of their subjective separateness and communality: when they do strive for or perceive a sense of subjective communality, they have limited success.

Both poles of this human lack of awareness and control over the boundaries of subjectivity emerge in a passage where new-in-town, liberal clergyman Richard Misner, co-officiant at a wedding with the more conservative Reverend Pulliam, tries to communicate his own notion of the divine as a universal instinct of human empathy and community. Ironically, the actual moment when subjectivities seem to touch each other happens in a moment of less exalted feeling, when Misner's mind wanders from noble fraternal sentiment to contemptuous and distinctly unempathetic reflection on the town's petty feuds and its folk superstitions about buzzards: "Simpletons, he thought. If this marriage is doomed, it had nothing to do with the birds." (*P* 147) The ungenerous thought aligns Misner's inner life word-for-word with that of his presumed ideological nemesis Steward Morgan, conservative descendant of Ruby's first patriarch, whose own internal scorn for "those young simpletons" mentored by Misner is narrated a few pages earlier. Misner and his opponents are shown here to unwittingly share a self-righteous and self-aggrandizing sense of outrage at what each side characterizes as willful ignorance. Steward castigates his "simpletons" as lacking all "notion of what it took to build this town" (*P* 93). Misner may "wince" at and take personally Pulliam's declaration that "'If you think [love] is natural you are blind'" (*P* 141) but a few minutes later he seems to echo Pulliam's condescending frustration and his metaphor of religious error as blindness when Misner stands before the congregation effectively trying to shame them into brotherly feeling with an upheld wooden cross, grimly thinking, "See?[…]See?" Misner achieves no

mystical communion with the rest of his audience, his thoughts becoming punitive and self-centered instead. He is unaware that his acute, martyred sense of alienation is what brings him uncannily close to the minds of the enemies he reviles and positions himself against.

That those convictions are narrated and interpreted by a third-person voice and not Misner's own is further evidence of an overseeing observer's will to control, and a rather competitive one, at work in the novel. Indeed, the direct thoughts of any character are never conveyed in the text but instead paraphrased in the third person. The narrator exercises an extra control here in not permitting readers to directly encounter the inner lives of characters. In refusing to grant its characters the agentive *I*, and instead veiling and filtering their thoughts through the glosses of a narrator operating from an apparently nonhuman divine point of view, the novel suggests that these people are never unsupervised in their thoughts. However disparate or rebellious, every belief appears to be anticipated, articulated, and even instilled by the godlike narrator. We only ever truly know the narrator's interpretation of the characters' minds, as if the narrator is reluctant to put us directly in touch with them. We have no absolute proof or experience of them as first-person subjects. Further, the narratorial glosses serve to undercut the characters, to make them look small-minded and unreflective, revealing things the characters do not know about themselves or do not want to acknowledge, as if punishing and discrediting them in front of the reader for their presumptions. This kind of framing seems to occur most frequently in the moments when characters claim insight into divine will. The narrator allows them to indict themselves by their own blasphemous, hubristic thoughts, appearing to allow the character to hold forth on God and morality but showing him or her up as an incompetent narrator, particularly of divine matters.

In its apparent self-effacement, the divine narrator evidences an indifference toward human squabbles and divisions but still affirms its superior perspective by displaying humans' incompetence

as theorists of divine and human nature. The narration of Misner's thoughts on the divine still manages to upstage Misner and his beliefs through a kind of cruel exposure of their inefficacy and Misner's own struggle to maintain them in the face of his audience's silence. Further, Misner is depicted as unfairly misreading that audience because of his concern with communicating his notion of the divine to them, missing opportunities for interpersonal connection that the narrator indicates are there but ironically invisible to Misner because of his preoccupation with his own account of divine-enabled communality. The depiction of Misner's humiliation before the congregation becomes in effect a narrative humiliation of the character, showing him up as self-involved, petulant, sanctimonious, and even elitist – decidedly unchristian.

Misner's god is one who seems, like Bruno Latour's "crossed-out god" of Enlightenment humanism, primarily symbolic, a stand-in for what Misner believes is human beings' protean capacity for fellow-feeling. This understanding of human significance in the context of the divine suggests to the older pastors a blasphemous will to usurp divine power. Misner interprets his faith as motivating and empowering human action for justice. He supports the civil rights cause at large and backing Ruby's radicalizing young people in their "blasphemous" contention that the oven inscription is the more active "Be the furrow of his brow," not "Beware the furrow of his brow." His reading of the cross as an evocation of a human face, at once a highly individual feature by which human identity is distinguished and a universal human reference point, offers a view of humanity's oneness that still allows room for individuality and self-aware, elective communality.

In this particular moment, the narrator seems to take the conservative pastor's side, making Misner's unconventional view of divinely-enabled fellowship look vain and self-serving. Misner does not seem to be practicing that view even as he attempts to impart it to Ruby. His aggrieved perception of himself as an embattled lone voice results in a partly self-imposed alienation that

prevents him from fostering any sense of sacred communality even with the handful of likeminded people in town – mostly women – whom he overlooks. The moment when Misner reflects on his divine in contrast to the rest of Ruby's is not one of solidarity or shared subjectivity with the congregation.

The entire performance is, in fact, shown by the third-person narratorial glosses on Misner's thoughts to be catalyzed by Misner's personal sense of grievance and wounded ego; he is sure that his co-officiant's stern declaration that "God is not interested in you" is part of "a widening war" on Misner, and he remains silent with the cross partly because he fears speaking will "[reveal] his deep personal hurt." (*P* 145) In the context of Misner's self-important interpretation of Pulliam's sermon, Misner's attempt to convey to the congregation that "not only is God interested in you; He *is* you" looks more like an unconscious expression of wounded narcissism than of divine fraternity: God is interested in *me*. Even Misner's assumptions about the other clergyman's opinion of him as a tempter "forcing [young people] to transgress" recall Misner's characterization and critique of Ruby's "begrudging authority" who leaves sinners "choiceless," as if Misner believes that deep down his enemies misunderstand him in the same way that they misunderstand the divine. The narration of Misner's convictions in this moment suggests that, in advocating for a humanistic, personal god, Misner succeeds only in making God personal in a small-minded, banal, earthbound way – taking all discourse on the divine, in fact, personally.

Nonetheless, the humiliation of Misner, who is likely to strike readers as one of the more sympathetic and reasonable figures in the novel, cannot be read as a straightforward narratorial judgment against tolerance and ecumenical liberalism. The implied narratorial attitude toward humans who presume to know divine will is not legible in typical political terms of right and left. The narrator commandeers Steward Morgan's inner life as well and uses it to expose him. Morgan is

shown up by the third-person narrator as a man whose convictions are rooted in his own ego rather than any high-minded community feeling. We meet Steward as he gives a God-like pronouncement on law and consequence at a town debate over a now-illegible sacred injunction written on the town's communal oven: "'If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eyed snake.'" (*P* 87) The narrator nonchalantly exposes him later the same night as surprisingly uninvested in the debate over version of the oven text: "Personally he didn't give a damn. The point was not why it should or should not be changed, but what Reverend Misner gained by instigating the idea[…]Foolish and maybe even dangerous." (*P* 93-94) Steward's earlier first-person vehemence looks somewhat silly here, and he is exposed as less powerful than his debate-ending threat would suggest: his bombastic stance on the oven is, his narrated thoughts imply, an insecure and even frightened broadside aimed at Misner.

The narrator even casts doubt on the degree to which Steward experiences himself as an individual with full psychological interiority. How much Steward himself knows of this discrepancy between his public attitude and his purported actual opinion, a discrepancy that when demonstrated like this makes Steward look foolish, is unclear. The milder, calculating assessment of the stakes of the argument, contradicting Steward's earlier first-person vehemence, comes from the narrator rather than directly from Steward, and seems to reveal a self-awareness that Steward himself, a man who ends the novel "insolent and unapologetic," (*P* 299) is unlikely to possess. The adverb "Personally," typically used in first-person statements, is jarring in this context and serves to call attention to the usurpation that has taken place: we are in fact not hearing "personally" from Steward. Like Misner's "personal hurt," Steward's personal feelings about the debate are unexamined by Steward himself; the novel provides only the narrator's reflections on the inner lives

of both men, not their own. As with Misner, Steward's authority on his own beliefs is vitiated. The narrator suggests that he does not know his own mind as well as the narrator does.

Moral Malevolence: The Divine Tempter

Seen through the narrator's eyes, humans cannot even formulate an accurate cosmological picture or a sense of themselves as they really stand in relation and obligation to other beings. Rather than step into this breach, *Paradise*'s divine narrator repeatedly appears to deliberately draw characters and readers into acts and thoughts that the narrator then indicates are transgressive. Moral accountability after the fact is kept similarly inscrutable, so that blame and surprisingly, even appalling sympathy fall unpredictably across human populations without regard for human political, social, or subjective boundaries. "Personal" responsibility as humans would recognize it does not exist here. The narrator by turns imputes moral culpability to whole communities and seems at times to allow guilty parties to evade full judgment. The result is a divine moral landscape of indiscriminate, unasked forgiveness and, from a human causal point of view, unwarranted blame, a paradoxical amoral morality. Readers are not only witnesses to this narratorial baiting but experience it themselves in trying to interpret the narrative, drawn by the narrator toward interpretations that turn out to be morally loaded and incriminating.

What emerges is a hardly reverent portrait of a pervasive moral authority who seems, perversely – satanically, even – irreverent in itself, eager to goad its subjects into transgressions, to mock but not correct their hypocrisy. Blasphemy is a foregone conclusion for readers and characters, and the divine narrator is blasphemously depicted as a tempter who incites believers to trespass and then capriciously punishes or pardons without any consistent causal logic between offense and consequence. This portrait appears to confirm Richard Misner's bitter reflections on the status quo divine-human relationship in Ruby – a portrait rendered, like all of Misner's supposedly

private thoughts, through the voice of the narrator, as if the narrator is at once forcing Misner to think it and relishing the chance to reiterate the description. Through the narrator, Misner laments that under the pastoral care of its other clergy, Ruby is

> […]a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness…] the believer's life[…]confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits were interest due on a debt that could never be paid.
>
> *P* 146

The "harried believers" of this community are forced, in Misner's view, into a kind of adversarial, compulsorily disobedient relationship with their god, rebelling against the "fate" he has foreordained for them by the very act of desperately and fruitlessly trying to obey him. Little distinction is made among individual "believers": "weak" or "sighted," all are already and endlessly culpable, obligatory rebels against the "begrudging authority" they want to love. The demonstrated ineffectuality of Misner's challenge to this paradigm for divine-human relations, his vision of intersubjective empathy, shores up the functional reality of divine-human interaction in Ruby as contentious and suspicious, with blasphemy and disobedience as a foregone conclusion.

The map of moral culpability that the narrator offers is muddled. As a result, no final narratorial statement relating the divine to the human is forthcoming: the narrator will not make sense of divine presence in human lives or illuminate how humans ought to understand and champion divine will. Sometimes the narratorial voice appears to reflect Misner's rivals' parochial view of human-divine obligation and interaction, condemning Misner's activism as blasphemous. At other points it undercuts and condemns their narrow orthodoxy. Misner seems poised to wrest Ruby's spiritual and political future away from them at the end of the novel, though even that apparent triumph of tolerance has its uncomfortable implications. While such a conclusion of divine undecidability might be framed as a satisfying answer in itself, it is unsettling here, especially since

the Convent victims and their emerging allies among Convent-frequenting Ruby women are as fully realized and present in the narrative as are the men, allowing their various fates of violence and repression to be fully felt as losses in the world of the novel. It is unclear whether the persecuted will have justice, whatever that might be.

In narrating the climactic violence that Ruby finally produces, the narrator is uninterested in locating guilt or worthiness in individuals; there is no discernible human logic of moral cause and effect in the outcome of the Convent murders, or at least not a logic in which individuals' fates correspond neatly or proportionately to their degree of guilt, virtue, and repentance. Punishments and moments of grace do seem to ensue, but they are distributed erratically among characters, and are sometimes even difficult to distinguish between. The narrator depicts the human characters as united not by any possibility of empathy but only in their moral culpability. This collective guilt is fully, immediately legible only in the eyes of the onlooking (or down-looking) divinity; the human subjects themselves are unable to imagine any kind of one-ness with God or each other, so they can never share the divine-eye-view of morality or fully understand their own moral status in relation to that of their fellows. They suffer from what looks much like the groping, rigged-game "choicelessness" Misner condemns. Even the free-spirited Convent women seem to have been doomed from the start. Driven from or abandoned by their own communities for different perceived transgressions and unwelcome in the Ruby of the town fathers, they end up casualties of presumptuous moralistic persecution on all sides, seen as fallen women in the world they flee and the one in which they arrive as supplicants. Significant parts of their stories remain untold, and their respective, nuanced individual histories of morally complexity are suggested but collapse at the end into a collective moral orientation – guilt in some witnesses' eyes, obvious innocence in others', ignored or avenged depending on point of view.

Months after the murders of the Convent women, many Ruby citizens uninvolved in the violence remain unable to gauge or evaluate their own implication in the incident despite continued appeals for a divine insight that remains "begrudging": "[T]hey were still chewing the problem, asking God for guidance if they were wrong: if white law should, contrary to everything they knew and believed, be permitted to deal with matters heretofore handled by and among them." Forced to negotiate dissonant earthly justice systems that operate along racially-determined community lines, even the characters who have tried to intervene across community divides on behalf of the Convent women are left morally paralyzed and unable to properly evaluate themselves in terms of a divine justice system that from their point of view competes with and contradicts, rather than serving as a natural extension of, worldly justice(s). The community is bound together – "The difficulties churned and entangled everybody" – but bound in an unconscious way that is neither edifying nor salutary, in which disparate understandings of guilt persist, with some tortured while others spout "arrogant self-defense [and] outright lies." (*P* 298) The narrator does not draw meaningful moral distinctions along individual lines, or make allowances based on individuals' hearts and minds.

At the same time, the narrator's resistance to narrating the particulars of the crime relieves some of the pressure of guilt that would otherwise fall on the actual murderers. The narrator may know their individual responsibility and judge each accordingly, but the reader is uncomfortably denied holding them accountable for their particular actions and is forced to withhold condemnation. The narrator is clear that the town fathers commit the murders, but seemingly uninterested in definitively establishing who exactly did what. Though the narrator eventually enumerates the men by name, the novel opens with a description of the Convent attack wherein they are left anonymous and collective, establishing at the outset the suspension of absolute judgment as a norm for the entire reading experience: none are designated as guilty beyond all doubt.

Nor does the final naming conclusively tie individuals to acts, or conclusively reveal the identities of victims; which exact charges should be laid at the feet of which men is unknown. Consolata "cradles the woman" she finds stricken on the floor, rubbing "the fuzz on the woman's head," but though the identity of the woman is surely known to Consolata, the narrator either does not know or does not find it important enough to specify, as if, with all of the women fuzzy-headed after shearing their hair as part of an earlier improvised ritual, they all seem more or less the same to the narrator anyway. Moments later, "[m]en are firing through the window at three women running through clover and Scotch broom," the unspecified men indistinguishable even by their location or the angle at which they shoot, the women similarly so in their own location and their flight.

Even Consolata's apparently definite shooting, narrated in deliberate prose that describes the split-second event from a perspective of uncanny clarity that cannot be human – "The bullet enters her forehead" – is shared uncertainly between the two men named in association with it, twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan. Deacon "lifts his hand to halt his brother's and discovers who, between them, is the stronger man." (*P* 289) Given that the shot is fatal, the likely interpretation would seem to be that Steward shoots and Deacon tries to intervene but is overpowered by his brother. The prose is, however, pointedly ambiguous. Deacon may discover who the stronger man is, but the narrator does not reveal it. What Steward is doing that Deacon wants to "halt" is likewise left unclear, however tempting it may be to assume he is taking aim at Connie. There is room for an alternative scenario wherein Deacon overpowers a reluctant or surrendering Steward to pull the trigger himself, or Deacon struggles with Steward and discharges the gun accidentally. They are let off not just within the world of the novel but by the narrative itself; the narrator effectively looks away at key moments. Bearing out Reverend Pulliam's rumblings, the narrator is "not interested" in any particular "you," and the connection between individual acts and

consequences is not legible in human terms. This god cannot be interpreted morally by human characters or readers.

Readers of *Paradise* are left in what feels like an existentially unfair bind that proliferates choices into choicelessness: forced to delineate and choose among different possible interpretations, each with moral implications, they are ultimately implicated and indicted by any choice. *Satanic Verses* establishes a sense of belligerent narrative and counter-narrative from the start, but the stakes of its often flatly contradictory storytelling are lower. The moral confusion induced by the narrative is apathetically teasing: the god-narrator does not pronounce one way or another on moral truth because he is tired of intervening in human affairs and irritated by his chosen vehicles of divine will. Rational and irrational explanations are offered for apparent miracles with the playful Arabic-derived invocation of Indian storytellers: "*Kan ma kan*[…] it was so, it was not." *Paradise* indicates to its reader that there *are* ethical stakes to its ambivalent, irreverent storytelling, and even that the reader may be implicated by his or her reading: the sense of play here is a rougher one.

Paradise does not supply the *kan ma kan* filter explicitly but instead induces the reader to uncertainly and even sometimes guiltily deploy his or her own from the first sentence, when a never-identified "white girl" is killed first in an attack by Ruby men on the convent women: "They shoot the white girl first." For the rest of the novel we meet characters who may or may not be this first victim; if it is a question we are interested in, we must read every convent woman's story at least two ways, situating her as a black woman in the 1970's United States and then as a white woman. The further possibility remains that our own understanding of "white" is wrong here, since in separatist, color-sensitive Ruby, even lighter-skinned black people are regarded as racial others. The question is never conclusively answered, and indeed leaves a reader who is preoccupied by this opening mystery to ask him or herself why it is important to determine who is white, and whether the term has any

fixed meaning outside of a color-segregated worldview. The narrator deliberately directs focus toward the race of one of the convent inhabitants, and marks her death as the only one demanding individual description, but provides no further interpretative traction for the reader to trace the "white girl" *qua* "white girl" throughout the rest of the novel. Those who try must ask themselves why they are prioritizing making this particular identification, or even assuming that such an identification has any reality in this narrative world or their own. Ultimately, to note and enumerate the different possible story versions suspended by calling out the death of the "white girl" raises the question of whether there actually are meaningfully different possible versions. The differences may only be real if a given character's whiteness makes a difference to the reader, affecting the way the reader distributes attention throughout the novel, and distinguishing the meaning or significance of her murder from the equally brutal apparent murders of the other women.

To emphasize or focus on this particular death is, as we learn later, to concern oneself with a distinction that the narrator renders quite literally parenthetical to the narrative in the final chapter that resumes the opening section's roving, character-blending perspective. The death of the "white girl" is shown here to be ultimately significant not in itself but because certain questionable – and, from the novel's point of view, marginal – secular authorities treat it as significant. In this last section, the ambiguous opening detail of the "white girl" is balanced conspicuously against other far more significant uncertainties around the Convent attack, uncertainties that give rise to permutations of the story with what seem to be far greater moral ramifications: did the murders occur? Were they murders? The narrator activates these questions, leaping from character to character to inhabit conflicting points of view on the incident, only to point out that a preoccupation with race among the powerful – who otherwise have no involvement in or relevance to the story – renders all these distinctions moot and compels all the different factions within Ruby to focus on race as well to the exclusion of everything else: "However sharp the divisions about what really took place[…]everyone

who had been there left the premises certain that lawmen would be happily swarming all over town (they'd killed a white woman, after all)[…]" (*P*, 298) Facing and redressing the violence that has occurred, acknowledging guilt and injustice, is indefinitely deferred so that the town can deal as a monolith with the existential threat posed by the presence of white law enforcement.

Readers still pursuing the mystery of the white girl are left uncomfortably aligned with these authorities, confronted with the fact that a preoccupation with the color of one victim usurps all other questions about the incident. Assigning significance to the "white girl" in particular, as the first sentence prompts the reader to do, becomes within the story an impediment to justice by allowing everyone involved to pay less attention to the greater mysteries of the attack that suggest otherworldly intervention. Ruby thus is able to avoid fully acknowledging, let alone interpreting, the apparent miracle of the vanishing bodies, which otherwise might have served as an indictment of some characters and an exoneration of others. The parenthetical interruption of "a white woman, after all" derails the construction of an account of the rest of the event. Readers who have questioned the identity of the white woman are left to confront their own complicity in a misdirection that the narrator seems, somewhat mischievously, to deliberately set up and then indict. The narrative sensibility conveyed by this trajectory of narrative misdirection and condemnation authoritatively identifies as matters for divine judgment and intervention both the crime and the racism that complicates justice in Ruby and outside. The narrator distinguishes a "white girl" victim, tempting the reader to do so as well, but this focus in part enables the violence of the novel: we are led to transgress and then given to know that we have, that our acceptance of the term to categorize and possibly prioritize human beings may be an everyday blasphemy in itself.

The narrative does not allow even the apparent miracle of the vanishing bodies, which seems to be the most concrete fantastic occurrence in the novel, to be read as an unequivocal divine

vindication of the murdered women and a reproach of their would-be killers. In fact, the possibility remains that it may not even be divinely sanctioned, and thus constitute blasphemous tampering with divine will. The novel and its characters equivocate around the provenance of other comparable supernatural events. Ruby midwife and mystic Lone may be convinced, as we are told, that the disappearance of the bodies is a "visible and unarguable" divine intervention in which God has "swept up and received His servants in broad daylight," (*P* 297) but her conclusion here recalls her earlier debate over life-sparing miracles with the murdered – or saved – Connie. It is Lone who recognizes in Connie what Connie considers to be the "satanic gift" of raising the dead and compels her, under duress, to "practice". (*P* 245)Lone may insist to Connie that this supernatural power of hers is willed by God, but we cannot ignore Connie's own deep and tortured conviction that it is "evil" (*P* 247), and the blasphemous thoughts it inspires in her toward God for having made this "mistake" in empowering her.

Notably, Connie makes uneasy peace with the ability only through what may be another kind of blasphemy, an irreverent speech act. In effect, she talks herself around her scruples: "it was a question of language." (*P* 247) What Lone terms "stepping in," Connie renames "seeing in," meaning that "the gift was 'in sight.' Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it." By this "devious" linguistic strategy that the narrator implies may only be a peacekeeping sophistry, Connie continues "to experiment with others" using her "gifts," including on her devout mother superior and erstwhile guardian who she knows would be horrified to have her life extended by magical means. Is the final disappearance of the bodies similar: supernatural but not consecrated, despite Lone's efforts to reconcile both types of resurrection? Meanwhile, the practical effect of this apparent miracle is to ensure the safety of the murderers from police attention. The miracle and the outcome may express divine power; they may also suggest human perversion of divine will. Connie herself seems to live again in the last pages of the novel, taking up "the endless work [she was]

created to do down here in Paradise," a conclusion that seems redemptive and in harmony with the implied creator. Whether that creator is identical to the god whose word and image torments her at the Convent, however, is unresolved: perhaps "down here" she has triumphed in the power struggle between human beings and the particular capricious version of divinity that haunts the rest of the novel.

Paradise and *Satanic Verses* represent blasphemy and transgression as the primary means by which a supernatural divine is experienced in the novel's twentieth-century, politically turbulent milieus. Divine authority is, paradoxically, reaffirmed but also questioned: brute supernatural divine power is not in doubt, but divine judgment is undermined and divine intentions toward humans are second-guessed. Blasphemy functions, however, as an alternative to disenchantment; none of the blasphemers of the novels live in disenchanted worlds, or seek to demonstrate disenchantment through blasphemy. Indeed, it begins to seem that to live in a world that contains the divine is inevitably to blaspheme, to misunderstand one's own obligations, to always guess wrong in the sense not just of "incorrect" but of "immoral."

Rushdie, reflecting on his novel, claims to possess a way out of this bind. The fact remains, however, that he does not allow his readers the same escape from culpability. Only the faithful can commit blasphemy, he writes in "In Good Faith," a long 1990 essay that originally appeared in *Newsweek* shortly following Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration of the fatwa over the supposed blasphemy of *The Satanic Verses*. By this reasoning Rushdie exonerates himself from the blasphemy charges while seeming nonetheless to imply that the accusation would be legitimate if he were a believer. Where he might discuss the other secular, cynical sociopolitical factors that might have motivated the fatwa, Rushdie instead chooses to take Khomeini at his word and affects to acknowledge blasphemy as a crime for some but not for himself: "I am a modern, and modern*ist*,

urban[…]secular, pluralist, eclectic man."[17] He shores up this declaration with a line from the allegedly blasphemous novel itself: "Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy." (*SV* 393)

Readers of *The Satanic Verses*, however, do not enter a narrative world in which not believing is an option for anyone, even those who desperately want to be modern, urban, and secular. Rushdie attributes the claim to "a character", but it comes in fact from the mysterious, maybe-all-knowing, and studiedly ambivalent narrating voice. The line is therefore more authoritative within the novel's world but also less hermeneutically straightforward than Rushdie's citation would suggest. The (by implication divine) narrator's declaration about the nature of blasphemy comes at moment in the story when it may be read to underscore the curious enchantment, in the strong sense, present among forcibly-converted Jahilia believers as they try nonetheless to modify Submission to their purposes. The recognition of blasphemy – and thus, by implication, the presence of belief – is a necessary part of the scheme that two recalcitrant Jahilians dream up in this moment for their brothel's prostitutes to impersonate the chaste and cloistered wives of the prophet. Blasphemy and its appeal, not disbelief, account for the success of the conceit. The clients believe to some degree that they are genuinely encountering, and profaning, something associated with the divine; however desecratory, their assignations constitute an intimate engagement with their new faith. This blasphemous engagement with the sacred produces further supernatural encounters, not doubt or apostasy. Gradual but sure transformations occur among the prostitutes such that each begins inexorably to take on the characteristics of the wife she impersonates. The transformations of the prostitutes suggest a supernatural engagement, through blasphemy, with Mahound, his household, and his god. Rebel and resist the new faith as they may, the brothel inhabitants cannot be apostates:

[17] Salman Rushdie, *In Good Faith* (New York: Granta, 1990), 13-14.

they instead become celebrants of a kind of alternative sacrament within the faith, albeit one appalling to the doctrinaire.

Morrison, by contrast, never claims to be secular, although her own beliefs have come under less scrutiny than Rushdie's. In interviews, Morrison does not shy away from admitting an engagement with the supernatural world. Secular, political existence, as she tells Christina Davis, is not the obvious antithesis of the magical that it is to Rushdie in the *Newsweek* piece: "My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew."[18] As John McClure recounts, Morrison's own description of writing at least sometimes suggests that she, too, is an instrument of revelation, in an "explicitly spiritual" sense that is not a language of metaphor or, as she notes in another interview, "the vocabulary of literary criticism."[19] Nor is this spiritual register apolitical, as she insists to Davis in rejecting "magical realism" as a descriptor for her work on the grounds that the term has been deployed as "a way of *not* talking about politics[…and] *not* talking about what was in the books."[20] Where Rushdie insists on secular politics, and secular liberalism, as utterly separate from supernatural belief, Morrison suggests that the supernatural must be recognized as activating, not shutting down, political questions, and vice versa.

McClure sees in Morrison a "creolized,"[21] "spacious spirituality[…]not just personally but politically enabling."[22] That spaciousness in both novels, however, can become agoraphobic, a vast unmappable field of moral decisions in which all moral guidance or moral logic is absent. There

[18] Toni Morrison, interview by Christina Davis in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 1994), 144.
[19] John McClure, *Partial Faiths* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 105.
Toni Morrison, interview by Gloria Naylor in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 210.
[20] Morrison, Davis interview, 143.
[21] McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 106.
[22] McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 105.

seems to be latitude and room for "backtalk" in this relationship to the divine, but a day of reckoning may always be on its way, for blasphemies characters have been cornered into. Blasphemous fantastic narrative imagines the radical freedom of irreverence but, in worlds where irreverence and reverence cannot be definitively known and service to the divine may look like irreverence as easily as it does reverence, there is no belief without blasphemy.

Chapter Four

Log In, Sign Out: Magical Virtual Reality in Thomas Pynchon and Karen Russell

Virtuality, the condition that adheres at least in common parlance to the ambiguous and growing world of technological social networks, is an increasingly conspicuous component of current reality. If it is to engage this new oneiric dimension of experience, contemporary fiction set in the present must contend with how to narrate events, some of them world-shaking, that transpire online. Virtual situations and occurrences have some degree of manifestation in physical space but would plainly be insufficiently represented by a mere description of that manifestation: an embodied human being sits still in an office, a plastic-encased device draws electricity to operate. This chapter addresses the late twentieth- and early twenty-first- century turn in the fantastic that I call "magical virtual realism."

Recent novels by Thomas Pynchon and Karen Russell imbue reality with new fantastic elements through the incorporation of the virtual. The virtual world increasingly permeates and, in fact, can be said to annex physical reality. Virtual spaces are depicted extending beyond an individual's online activity, into the technologically networked, simulation-layered environments of the "real world." These novels treat the virtual as a near-ubiquitous addition to reality on and offline rather than a toy-like alternative to it. In virtual space, coding or programming can call new, previously impossible conditions into existence. Such programming is mediated or even at times conducted entirely by cognizing nonhumans, inflecting virtual environments with mysticism for the average user. The online world (and the world, online) as narrated here is a place where otherwise impossible encounters can occur, inhabitants of invisible realms can manifest, and ordinary people can slip the laws of society and even nature. Even the most banal of online interpersonal meetings

take on a ghostly cast, with all parties nebulously defined and self-defining, able to waft in and out. There is fantastical communion across vast space and even time; there is also dreamlike instability, head-spinning flux. Virtual presence can be assured at almost all times via networked devices and people are reachable even, it sometimes appears, beyond death, but in unpredictable moments of technological failure or apparent intransigence, the seemingly real blinks out of being. Absent, unreachable entities – the dead, the missing, the imaginary – may cohere into presence, but the seemingly real and present can vanish without warning into unreachable absence.

In the tradition of romance heroes, Maxine Tarnow and Ava Bigtree, the respective protagonists of Thomas Pynchon's 2013 *Bleeding Edge* and Karen Russell's 2011 *Swamplandia!* both go willingly into dark enchanted forests of different kinds. In opposition to traditional romance conventions, however, these journeys are not departures from the rational, civilized pale as part of a subtractive secularizing attempt to rationalize or close off the wild reaches. Rather, they are explorations of previously unknown, add-on reaches within that pale that turn out to be determined and governed by rules outside the rational, as in a dream of finding extra rooms in a familiar house.

In *Bleeding Edge*, a routine investigation into a tech company conducted by renegade Manhattan fraud-buster Maxine reveals what may be a conspiracy involving the United States government, foreign power brokers, hackers, venture capitalists, dot-com moguls, and underworld operators, as well as a growing number of fantastic figures from ghostly revenants to time-travelers. The World Trade Center terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occur as Maxine tries to piece this web together; the evidence suggests she has stumbled upon those truly responsible for the plot, though nothing is ever resolved. In S*wamplandia!*, 13-year-old narrator Ava, raised in a Florida swamp wrestling alligators for audiences, leaves home to wander the swamp looking for her runaway spirit-channeling sister Ossie. Ava hopes to find Ossie and the entrance to an underworld where she

believes her dead mother waits for her. She is guided by a mysterious drifter who later rapes her; fleeing, Ava becomes lost in the surreal swamp wilderness, encountering her mother and other ghosts among – or within – the preternaturally agentive, nonhuman-populated landscape before she is reunited with her family at the end and moves away from the swamp.

Much of each narrative transpires in hitherto unexplored pockets of Maxine's and Ava's native milieus. Maxine's most revelatory wanderings occur not in the grid of New York City but in a disorienting labyrinth she accesses from her home office. Her sojourn brings her into the disembodied wilds of the Deep Web, depicted here as the little-known, unsearchable frontier of the Internet. The scope of reality seems to expand as she plumbs the virtually real Internet world, finding intimations of impossible coincidences, government-backed occult doings, and possibly supernatural interlocutors. While her questions run up against impasses in the physical realm of "meatspace," the Deep Web is a place where answers to questions beyond the "secular" order of meatspace can be sought. The 9/11 conspiracies that implicate everyone from high-up politicians to her sons' martial arts instructor circulate freely, if clandestinely, online. Those silenced by disappearance, political suppression, and even death may be able to speak to the above-ground living in the simulated safe house of DeepArcher, an endlessly modified and enlarged secret Deep Web community. No definite answers come, leaving Maxine and the reader adrift among explanations of events that may be the result of conspiracy, accident, or unknown mystical forces. DeepArcher, flooded by mysterious, self-reinventing "refugees" [1] from the "meatspace" world who code and re-code its virtual reality, continues to expand and change, a flickering spirit world that allows visits to the past and the future.

[1] Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 357. Hereafter, quotations from *Bleeding Edge* refer to this edition and are cited in-text as *BE* with page numbers.

Ava loses herself in a labyrinth of a different kind that backs up to the supposedly safe environment of her backyard. Here, human technology fails or goes awry, a metaphysical disruption or rewiring that allows otherwise impossible communions and events to take place. Ava's family, splintered by her mother's recent death, runs their failing alligator theme park from their home on an island in Florida swamplands left ecologically upside down but not subdued by ongoing human efforts to technologize it into commercially viable land. Ava is left alone when her father and brother leave to work on the mainland and her ethereal sister Ossie vanishes into the swamp, leaving a note that claims she has eloped with a ghost. Ava ventures into the swamp after her, finding, as Maxine does, that in this new environment, what is possible expands beyond the rational and the space can even be, as in *Bleeding Edge*, "recoded" unpredictably. The predatory vagrant who promises to guide her to the underworld claims mystical understanding of the terrain, and appears to command and negotiate with birds. This form of supernatural communication is one of a number that the swamp, like the Deep Web, enables, equating spirit channeling with technological channeling. Supernatural communication modes are analogized as, and frequently serve as a direct replacement for, technological networks in places where technology fails in the shifting, ontologically mutable swamp. Beyond analogy, telepathy and telephony seem to be simply two complementary branches of one system. The Ouija board Ossie uses for her otherworldly socializing (a response, in part, to the inability of a purportedly rational, scientific world to save the life of their cancer-stricken mother) is described as a "private rotary,"[2] while Ossie's channeling manual, *The Spiritist's Telegraph*, encourages her to think of her body as a mechanical receiver for messages from the dead.

[2] Karen Russell, *Swamplandia!* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2011), 43. Hereafter, quotations from *Swamplandia!* refer to this edition and are cited in-text as *S!* with page numbers.

These encrypted reaches of otherwise familiar settings are set off as theaters of fantastic adventure and alterity not only because they are sites of impossible events but also because they are composed of and populated by nonhuman entities that outnumber and overmatch human individuals. Nonhumans – animals, plants, buildings, geological is phenomena, ghosts, machines, artificial intelligences – rise to meet human interlopers with an agency that defies not just human control but rational human understanding. Humans too, in this environment, come to understand their agency differently; *Bleeding Edge* hints at a collective consciousness that may be tapped on the Deep Web, with physical individuality shed. Nonhuman actors produced by advanced technology, natural phenomena, and perhaps genuinely supernatural events frequently lead into one another or co-occur, suggesting a commensurability among all three. One can walk or click unwittingly from a secular humanist, rule-obeying world into a fantastic one. Ava searches among the melaleuca for the underworld, just as Maxine browses the Deep Web for data and ghosts alike. Magical virtual realist landscapes offer alternatives to the secular humanist understanding of the place of the human in a world of proliferating nonhuman agents. With these alternative orientations of the world comes the chance to reinterpret anthropocentric accounts of history, access what has been suppressed from the official record, and even reframe the future.

Despite their enduring, if speculative, presence in narrative and in sociopolitical discourse, supernatural agents have received little recognition in their capacity as nonhumans from theorists and critics of the nonhuman. Nor has recent theoretical and critical discourse on supernatural and religious experience in narrative and in real life tended to characterize otherworldly forces and entities this way. This chapter seeks to put these two rich, recently active discourses in more direct dialogue. Much has been written, with the recent proliferation of nonhuman theorizing, on

technology and also on the natural world as sites of nonhuman agency. [3] Meanwhile, the agentive role played by human belief in supernatural entities and events has been examined in postcolonial studies,[4] as well as in literary criticism on "post-secular" and "postmodern" belief, and sociological studies of "lived religion."[5]

This chapter considers specific moments when nonhumans become fantastic and, moreover, confer fantastic possibilities onto humans, incorporating them into new communions across old boundaries, redrawing physical and biological constitutions. Unknowable though they may be, noticed by humans or not, supernatural nonhumans are agents with the power to intervene in the secular humanist world. As discussed below, nonhuman nature and technology are sites of supernatural agency for nonhumans, humans, and inextricable assemblages thereof in magical virtual realist fiction. This view of the literary supernatural nonhuman stands in contrast both to Bennett's reading of enchantment-as-cipher and the interpretations of critics John McClure and Fredric Jameson, discussed below, of enchanting nature as a passive, neutral zone of disengagement and

[3] See Introduction. See Jane Bennett (*The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*; *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*); Andy Clark (*Natural Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*; *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*; *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind*); Andy Clark and David Chalmers ("The Extended Mind"); Roberto Esposito (*Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*), N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*); Bruno Latour (*We Have Never Been Modern, Aramis*); Mick Smith (*Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*).

[4] See Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd edition), and Ian Baucom

[5] See Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe*), John McClure, (*Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*), David D. Hall (ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*), Amy Hungerford (*Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960*), Meredith B. McGuire (*Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*), Robert Orsi (*The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* and "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in Hall).

enchanting technology as an inherently tainted, authoritarian tool incompatible with active political resistance.

Magical Virtual Realism

Much of the existing criticism on the fantastic presence of the nonhuman sublime in literature concerns itself with the speculative world of science fiction and fantasy "genre" novels. I distinguish the contemporary fantastic mode on display through nonhuman agency in Pynchon and Russell from works of speculative fiction; using a hybrid of two catchphrases, I call the mode of the fantastic that I discuss here "magical virtual realism." This term borrows and builds on the term "magical realism" because I contend that the supernatural elements introduced in this mode are part of a strategy to represent reality, rather than an escapist abdication of it. The two novels of this study are ostensibly set in the present world, at the present time; as in other magical realist novels, miraculous events are presented matter-of-factly in the course of what may be otherwise naturalistic, conventional narratives. The fantastic seeps into the nonhuman in here without any need for imagined inventions or landscapes of the future. Gadgetry invades and extends human bodies, information travels like a contagion, and nightmare postapocalyptic vistas stretch before the characters without any projection or speculation needed.

The virtual as I define it here is any technologically mediated environment, though that technology may take forms beyond computer simulations. This mediation is guided and seemingly instigated by the projections of human imagination and desire in defiance of existing reality, though inevitably it responds to and deploys nonhuman forces in both intentional and unintentional, unpredictable ways. It may not seem intuitive to describe Russell's swamp, or the "meatspace" real city outside Pynchon's Deep Web, as virtual. The swamp and the city are the kind of physical spaces against which users of virtual reality headsets, for instance, intuitively distinguish the immaterial

simulations they experience, however convincing. Magical virtual realism, however, represents these spaces as mediated by technological networks and simulations that make them rule-breakingly supernatural. A space where reality is re-imagined and reality's laws are therefore re-theorized or reworked is by definition a fantastic space, the site of a "break in the system of pre-established rules."[6] Accordingly, I find that virtuality in the novels I focus on here intersects with and produces magical or magical-seeming experiences and events.

In the magical virtual realist mode, the nonhuman other of technology and the increasingly obtrusive nonhuman other of nature – frequently intersecting in mutually amplificatory ways – add reality, as Latour would say. Enabled by enhanced understanding of the natural world, applications of scientific knowledge give rise to transformative new worldly possibilities, hitherto the stuff of fantasy. Not all possibilities are foreseen or intended by human beings, however, and an enhanced understanding of nature means an enhanced awareness of the many lacunae in that understanding. When nature and technology alike prove capricious, and behave in defiance of the "natural laws" by which humans assume they operate, the result is a rearrangement of reality that makes a world of the supernatural newly perceptible and continuous with ordinary human life.

Previous critical work has noted literary attempts to evoke a new, technologically-generated irrational space, if not a "magical" one, though such spaces are frequently interpreted as inescapable and often imperceptible tools of surveillance and control, designed and operated exclusively in the interests of consolidating power and maximizing profit. Frederic Jameson describes an aesthetic of "technological sublime"[7] in postmodern cultural production. Jameson's technological sublime is in

[6] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 166.
[7] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 37.

some ways comparable to the virtual magical realist mode I describe here in that it attempts to figure a new landscape generated by technology: the technological sublime is that which is "glimps[ed]" in work that "beyond all thematics or content […]seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process […]documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space around us."[8] However, for Jameson the technological sublime is an obscure awareness of boundless power beyond the grasp of individual humans' reason. Technology and technological networks, in themselves, are mere stand-ins, clumsy metonymic attempts to figure multinational capital on a global scale. There is nothing "mesmerizing and fascinating,"[9] or for that matter ineffable, about current technology in itself. In Jameson's interpretation, it is the pliant tool of the "interlocking and competing information agencies"[10] that, unseen, wield this power. Jameson, insisting as he does on the difficulty of representing the machine in an age where machines have become chiefly "reproductive" rather than "productive" – the computer and the television, he argues, do not lend themselves to visual iconography[11] – seems indeed to overlook these machines even as he writes about them, without regard for the mediating role they and other nonhumans inevitably play in the new postmodern space to which he alludes.

Because they are so recent, little criticism exists on *Bleeding Edge* and *Swamplandia!* Much has been written, however, regarding Pynchon's treatment of technology in earlier novels, though interpretations of its function in the text vary.[12] John McClure, rehearsing Jameson's argument for

[8] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37.
[9] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37.
[10] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.
[11] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 36-38.
[12] Pynchon himself appears to advance a wary critique of the technological in his 1984 op-ed "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" Asking the question in his own voice, Pynchon identifies the twentieth-century Luddite urge as a nostalgia for both the supposedly pre-technological Age of Miracles and, now, the pre-computer age of secular humanism: a yearning for "violations of the laws of nature" and a special place for humans in the cosmic order. The assumption of the piece is that technological engagement is at odds with both of these supernatural possibilities, and that Ludditism

this technological sublime as an irresistible experience of authority and surveillance, opposes the technological to an anti-authoritarian numinous in Pynchon's earlier *Gravity's Rainbow* and *V*. The only effective political and existential resistance in the novel, according to McClure, comes from a disengagement with technology. Technological reachability, in McClure's account, is one-way: individuals are passively reachable by an authority that uses its machines to maintain access to them at all times and destroy them for insubordination. To be reachable means only to be subject to punishment and control. McClure's redemptive readings of Pynchon's *V*. and *Gravity's Rainbow* portray technological disengagement as a kind of supernatural transcendence without actual transcendence of materiality, desired by those who seek an ethical "way of living *in* this world that would constitute redemption."[13] This way of living *in* the world entails a passive refusal to be technologically reachable: McClure's example of Tyrone Slothrop's final physical dissolution suggests that he has slipped the "panoptical technologies of control".[14] Escape is, in this formulation, necessarily getting oneself off the technological "grid"[15] of virtual networks, networked devices, and infrastructure that enable detection and tracking. Such an ungridding is figured more as the result of individual inaction than action, a matter of waiting for an end to the grid that in McClure's account begins to seem inevitable: wars and campaigns of environmental destruction prosecuted by Western imperialism ultimately destroy the very infrastructure that supports them,

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is thus a last stand against disenchantment: "To insist on the miraculous is to deny the machine at least some of its claims on us, to assert the limited wish that living things […] may on occasion become Big and Bad enough to take part in transcendent doings." Science fiction and fantasy narratives that depict supernatural violations of natural laws, per Pynchon, are pro-Luddite texts that critique scientific hubris and resist the machine to assert the human. I would suggest that *Bleeding Edge* depicts a more complicated relationship between the supernatural and the technological, and explores forms of rebellion against natural and political authority that would be impossible for a pure Luddite to carry out.
Thomas Pynchon, "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?", *The New York Times*, October 28, 1984.

[13] John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London: Verso, 1994), 174.

[14] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 170.

[15] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 171.

creating an "unmappable zone[…]in the heart of a metropolitan order."[16] Actual use of the grid or gridding technology as an instrument of resistance – let alone of fantastic resistance – is, oddly, not discussed; McClure appears to assume that the partisanship of the grid is unavoidable and self-evident. While technology's violence, turned destructively back on itself, can open new vistas for grid-resisters, it can never be their instrument.

As McClure acknowledges, to imagine an ungridding of the kind he discerns in *Gravity's Rainbow* is to imagine a "benign re-enchantment of the world" that spawns its own "new ethical and metaphysical binaries" of romance, continuing to nurture a nostalgic fantasy of purification and metaphysical homecoming that may produce further "self-mystification and violence."[17] This vision of "benign re-enchantment" is, however, not just likely to give rise to binaries; it is founded on the questionable binary opposition of the technological and the law-violating, natural numinous. For McClure the technological, as the presumed outgrowth of Western rationalism, represents the height of "global rationalization and disenchantment".[18] On one side stand the "global elites with elaborate technologies of domination,"[19] which are set against "worldly spiritualities".[20] Science and its applications to worldly problems vies with – and, at least morally speaking, loses to – an apparently antithetical mystical communion with the natural world.

Needless to say, the pastoral "worldly spiritualities" in which renegades may find refuge and solace are never to be found in the technological realm. The grid may have a whiff of mystery, but that is only the illusory impression of the uninitiated when faced with the intricate workings of power, and real encounters with the numinous only happen offline. Unreachability is closest to

[16] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 170.
[17] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 174-175.
[18] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 173.
[19] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 178.
[20] McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 175.

moral and spiritual triumph, when the renegade cannot be found or contacted through the technological apparatuses of governmental control. This may represent a resistance, but it is an isolated and limited one, out of touch with the dominating global elites but also necessarily with other renegades and other victims of the elites' domination. Slothrop's apparent monadic isolation at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* looks a lot like passive disengagement. McClure's reading seems to imply that this nonparticipation is the epitome of resistance.

I argue against McClure and Jameson for the possibility of political resistance and supernatural communion through the magical virtual landscapes to which technological networks give rise. This additive reality has much in common with the multipotent reality James Tabbi describes, in his alternative take on the technological sublime and its political and spiritual implications. Tabbi argues that Pynchon and his successors model – through multiple, contending narrative simulations that echo the technological simulations of their characters – a form of "detailed engagement" with simulations that allows those engaged to "imagine styles of resistance that are not merely *oppositional*" and passive.[21] Living within rather than passively refusing these simulations, per Tabbi, thus does not mean an abdication of realism or reality;[22] through competing simulations we can at least gather a sense of the limits on our own ability to comprehend reality in its vast true dimensions. Moreover, beyond this negative epistemology, technological simulations can be endlessly modified and multiplied by the imaginative projections of those who inhabit them, in

[21] James Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 28.

[22] Where for Jean Baudrillard "simulation culture" produces paralyzing uncertainty about reality, Tabbi emphasizes the polyvocal creative agency manifest in the "whole world of simulations" (Tabbi, 27.) that proliferate in Pynchon's work in form and content. Within the narratives, there are the simulations produced by technological networking. The narratives themselves, with their paranoic accumulation of explanations and versions, as well as their "proliferation of styles and multiple perspectives," echo those in-world simulations, from the endless experimental simulations of the parabola's flight in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the ghostly broadcast of the dead, ancient and recent, that overcomes the totalizing, rationalizing authoritarian narrative in *Vineland.* (Tabbi, 103.)

order to produce "an operational" and "livable" reality. Likewise, the narrative simulations "run" by the author can be speculatively augmented with multiple versions and points of view.[23]

For Tabbi, these conflicting versions can redeem lost or repressed historical truth: the myriad magical, conspiratorial, and naturalistic interpretations advanced through the simulations of Pynchon and his characters "converge on a vanished historical reality," "constellating" around a hitherto lost piece of the real.[24] Tabbi suggests that confrontations between these simulative versions can prove artistically and cosmologically transcendent. Accumulating and clashing virtually-inflected spaces generate enchantments and varying models of spirituality.[25] To follow the (il)logic of the technological world's enchanting simulations, contra Jameson, is not necessarily to be neutralized. Confrontations between simulative versions, Tabbi maintains, can prove artistically and cosmologically transcendent: the collision of supernatural, technological, and naturalistic narratives casts the limits of each in relief, drawing awareness to "the point where [such limits] break down" and "two or more separate rational systems come into conflict with each other, creating the spiritual equivalent of worlds intersecting."[26] These clashing (ir)rationalities usher in "a noumenal world 'between' powers, and perhaps even beyond the precincts of the controlling imagination."[27] How exactly such alchemical moments are achieved and recognized remains unclear, but it appears that the co-presence of seemingly contradictory paradigms produces something like Latour's binary-destroying hybrids, leaving a larger reality to re-form out of the ruins of two smaller ones. The "spiritual equivalent" of worlds intersecting seems to allow for the narrative to re-cast history. It also

[23] Tabbi, 27-28 and 103.
[24] Tabbi, 93.
[25] Tabbi, 91-95.
[26] Tabbi, 92.
[27] Tabbi, 92.

raises doubts about the author as sole authority in creating and limiting the reality of the textual world.

I use Tabbi's notion of a reality made through the multiplication and collision of separate "systems" and the projection of imaginations onto landscapes and events. Like Tabbi, I maintain that ways can be found inside virtual worlds to make them "livable" sites of resistance. This chapter explores in particular the reachability conferred by engagement in virtual magical environments, whereby technological networking allows contact never before possible, a phenomenon rendered in these novels as one of supernatural connectivity. Lost people, lost causes, and whole lost places are found through a hybrid technological-spiritual grid that includes reaches the powerful cannot monopolize. The respective enchanted journeys undertaken in these novels have some superficial resemblance to the pastoral escapes McClure describes in *Late Imperial Romance*, but they are aimed at contact, not disconnect: the swamp of *Swamplandia!* is no pastoral retreat but an embattled technological-natural space literally and figuratively haunted by the wronged. DeepArcher includes elements of nostalgia for an earlier, idealized New York that might be called urban pastoral, but these aesthetic touches are mere window dressing for a mysterious, ever-changing landscape where other wronged ghosts assemble.

While the magical virtual realism of these works by no means offers a wholly sanguine account of the technologically-linked supernatural, it nonetheless depicts a more nuanced view of virtual worlds as fantastic spaces for encounters with the numinous. These encounters can enable active resistance, intervention, and subversive communication among those who populate the virtual space. This is not to say that virtual spaces are passive backdrops for human agendas; myriad and discordant agentive trajectories make up the unpredictable magical virtual landscape. Still, however

ambivalently, magical virtual realist works figure technological networks as potential theaters for subversion of, if not full resistance against, authoritarianism and even Western secular reason.

These numberless, infinite manifestations of agency erode the connection of technology to the rational, an erosion Jameson notes even though his account of these unseen forces is limited to agendas of control pushed by powerful "information agencies."[28] However, other agendas may be brought to bear in the new magical virtual space, beyond the competing authoritarianisms that Jameson's technological sublime dimly registers. The overwhelming, ungraspable technological network that Jameson interprets as the forces of "capital" is in fact just one among many others composed of humans, objects, and nonhuman beings. In *Bleeding Edge*, the near- and outright supernatural prescience and contact allowed by these networks even sometimes seems to help resist authoritarian cooptation, as in the case of the handheld Cybiko by which Maxine's sons communicate about and foil a kidnapping attempt by Maxine's mysterious, powerful enemies ("Talk about private networks," Maxine thinks). Ava's sister Ossie works around the secular finality of death by way of spiritualist "telegraphy." To adapt Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of a History I (the trajectory of capitalism) and a History II outside the Marxist narrative, we could speak of a Technological Sublime II, one that has nothing to do with trying to grasp late-stage capitalism.

Magical virtual realism narrates a world where supernatural reality comes into being through the simultaneously technological and material enactment of human imaginings, though both circulation and enactment exceed human control. Maxine's software engineer acquaintances Lucas and Justin ultimately open DeepArcher up to all comers by sharing the source code in a paradoxical effort to defend it from the nefarious authorities who they suspect have infiltrated, making way for an anarchic ontological democracy where anyone (or anything) with the technical skills can re-dream

[28] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

the landscape. Likewise, Russell's swamp and its inhabitants defeat and protect themselves from the incursions of human government and human profit-seeking by way of those very incursions: technological meddling on the part of humans produces an even more treacherous swamp, where dependence on technology that operates logically is a liability, and calls to the underworld get through more often than cellphone signals.

In virtual magical realism, technology is used in an effort to create a controlled environment that overlies and to some degree reproduces the natural one, with modifications meant to benefit humans. Nature and technology prove unbiddable in both novels, though, particularly when, as Latour warns, they covertly join together to produce spatiotemporal hybrids that defy rationality: Pynchon's palimpsestic landscape of Manhattan Island online and off, for instance, or Russell's haunted, melaleuca-sown swamp. Human attempts to manipulate, recreate, and recast the natural world are shown in these novels to produce on the one hand carefully regulated simulative spaces – the hidden Internet metropolis Maxine visits, the theme park – and, within or alongside, unanticipated feral zones of natural-technological backlash on the other.

Bleeding Edge enchants meatspace anew by emphasizing its increasing resemblance to cyberspace, as supernatural subversions of natural laws first become possibilities online and then make their way into meatspace reality. The narration of meatspace makes it seem less material as this melding continues, or less bound by the rules of traditional materiality, while cyberspace is described in deceptively material terms that encourage readers to conflate it with meatspace, focusing on its illusionary materials at the expense of keeping its real materiality and material dependencies in mind for most of the novel. In this apparent misdirection, it seems to engender the sort of error N. Katherine Hayles warns against when she notes that a tendency to regard the online world as pure

information risks overlooking the material objects and processes on which it depends.[29] While Maxine reminds herself periodically, in an effort to keep the truth of DeepArcher in mind, that the landscape she identifies as city, desert, or abyss is in fact "only code," this disavowal effectively only goes part of the way, asserting that the visual is the result of programming and nothing more, but failing to also acknowledge the physical objects that support that programming. This apparently naïve – at least in Hayles' view – engagement with virtual magical space on the part of Maxine and the narrator alike nonetheless allows Maxine to communicate across spirit world boundaries in her quest to plumb the source of the violence that has just devastated her city, and to situate it in context with the secret, constant state violence and control that preceded and will soon follow it. Through her DeepArcher life, she connects with history's silenced victims: the murdered and the disappeared. To a degree, then, prioritizing materiality is a red herring in an increasingly virtual world, an encumbrance in certain situations where focusing on the enchanted spaces conjured by code, looking *through* and not *at* the computer screen, in the formulation of Jay Bolter and Diane Gromala, is in fact the more effective and productive strategy. Faced with the overwhelming materials of the Fresh Kills landfill, where nothing, not even the pulverized remains of the World Trade Center and its captives, is ever really thrown away, Maxine is reminded of the Internet, but the landfill of online information can be sifted more easily than Fresh Kills; unlike Fresh Kills, the Internet can follow through on its promises that nothing is ever lost.

Materiality is undercut in a different way in *Swamplandia!*: it is no guarantee of firm literal or ontological ground. *Swamplandia!* begins with a swamp described in terms as material and concrete as dryland but nonetheless starkly contrasting to that dryland in its ephemerality, its constantly working and worked-upon landscape. Indeed, the swamp becomes, if anything, more materially palpable even

[29] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 18-19.

as its virtual magical caprice escalates, leaving Ava immersed and overwhelmed, at the climax, in its mud, water, and vegetation. This watery, shifting world has been in large part created by material technological interventions in the swamp that have disturbed it in ways that are both material and spiritual: it is thoroughly haunted and environmentally chaotic. Organizing this swamp is not a matter of conventional geography or stable landmarks. Various patterns that, like the changing DeepArcher code and "pseudorandom" site paths, are both crucial for navigation and fully legible to few, most of which adepts are nonhuman. The swamp thus appears to display the central condition by which Hayles defines the condition of virtuality: the ascendancy of "pattern […] over presence"[30] that characterizes Maxine's often uncritical engagement with the DeepArcher world as well. Getting around the swamp means, as in DeepArcher, a time-specific understanding currents, migrations, and sounds.

However, despite the increased importance of pattern in the swamp world, material presence never slips out of view in *Swamplandia!* as it sometimes does in *Bleeding Edge*. The material presences that underlie patterns, the presences Hayles cautions against overlooking, are kept visible by the fact that the patterns are perceived in material events: flights of birds, hurricanes, plant growth described in smothering, strangling sensory detail. Pattern can transform and animate the material, but material remains central; its metamorphoses confirm the nature-subverting magic of the swamp. Ultimately, the nonhuman pattern-presences with which Ava communes – plants, animals, currents, weather, spirits – displace the more conventional forms of technological connection with which they are frequently analogically linked. Further, the solid, mundane spaces of the Swamplandia! island home and the dryland amusement park where Ava's brother Kiwi seeks a practical solution to his family's money troubles turn out to both hold merely inept, self-indulgent simulations of the swamp, toy-like

[30] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 19.

diversions that attempt to represent and, perversely, commodify and even celebrate the virtualized swamp's wild violence and destruction. Engaging sincerely and materially with these simulations yields, for Ava and Kiwi, a limited ability to function in the swamp, endowing them with a physical prowess that is nonetheless often stymied by the swamp's mystical aspects, which are both tangible and not bound by the physical rules that govern other tangible things.

Bleeding Edge

The characteristic Pynchonian paranoia of possible interconnected plots and conspiracies finds consummation in the hyperlinked world of cyberspace. Finding the way into DeepArcher requires paranoid clicking that recalls Oedipa Maas' meatspace search for meaning in every wall scribbling and stray conversation in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Confined though she is to a Manhattan apartment, Maxine wanders a facsimile of a train station as disorienting as Oedipa's journey through the sprawling web of south Californian highways, compelled to interrogate every pixel. When Maxine ventures that the path through the site is laid "at random," one of the site engineers corrects her: "'At pseudorandom.'" (*BE* 78) An obscure but deliberate design structures this world and its events.

Conspiracy here does not indicate, however, that the Deep Web is controlled by any overarching human plan that, if revealed and untangled, would be rationally intelligible to a human visitor, or that rational rules even apply. Rationality is anathema to this space, and hangs over it as a denaturing threat. "You want secular cause and effect, but here, I'm sorry, is where it all goes off the books," one contact tells Maxine. (*BE* 376) DeepArcher regulars are eager to push the narrative of the Deep Web as a wilderness apart from secular life, though a vulnerable one: "'Link by link, they'll bring it all under control, safe and respectable. Churches on every corner. Licenses in all the saloons. Anybody still wants his freedom'll have to saddle up and head somewhere else,'" one DeepArcher

interlocutor says, evoking tropes of the tamed American frontier. (*BE* 241) What guides the virtual world is closer to supernatural influence than scientific engineering, bringing a wider cosmological schema into view. The spooked young graphic artist who designs the DeepArcher landing page, an evocative image of an archer, face averted, looking into an abyss, explains the work as the result of an occult communion with a force working through her: "It was all just coming from somewhere, for about a day and a half I felt I was duked in on forces outside my normal perimeter, you know? Not scared, just wanted to get it over with, wrote the file, did the Java, didn't look at it again." (*BE* 86) The irrational, illegible nature of DeepArcher is clear in the diction of its purported architects too, who don't shy away from characterizing the experience as a mystical one, beyond even their ken, even as they avoid making any sweeping cosmological claims, insisting that they "don't do metaphysical." (*BE* 427) Exploring DeepArcher is figured as divination, the results of which even its own human architects can't predict – "'You're dowsing for transparent links, each measuring one pixel by one, each link vanishing and relocating as soon as it's clicked on…'" (*BE* 78-79) Some links are live, some are dead ends; there is always the promise of the next click, the next seemingly ordinary pixel. DeepArcher is a paranoid Pynchonian environment at its most superstitious, supernatural extreme, its every inch plotted by architects who are themselves supplanted in their control by the server they set in motion to keep all parts of the operation mysterious to each other.

The virtual world comes to serve as a means by which Maxine can engage with a reinvigorated supernatural. More is possible in the virtual dimension that technology adds to Maxine's experience, and the encroachment of the virtual on meatspace (discussed below) means that more becomes possible there as well. Maxine's DeepArcher absorption is thus ultimately an end in itself rather than a means by which to sound the conspiratorial depths, a form of communion with nonhuman and posthuman – even posthumous – others. *Bleeding Edge* flirts with variations of typical conspiracy theories about the September 11, 2001 hijackings and attacks, conspiracies in the

conventional sense – engineered by one powerful person or a small cabal of powerful people. However, such anthropocentric narratives come by the end of the novel to seem beside the point; the real gatekeepers to mystery turn out to be the cognizing machines and software programs that enable virtuality. When DeepArcher goes "open source," it becomes available to an anonymous and immense public of "ROM hackers, homebrewers, RPG heretics" who get to work "continually unwriting and overwriting, disallowing, deprecating, newly defining an ever-growing inventory of contributions to graphics, instructions, encryption, escape." (*BE* 426) The list of new presumably human participants in the fabrication of DeepArcher virtuality implies, though it also occludes, a legion of other new digital and mechanical participants that play intercessory roles in everything that goes on between humans online.

Together, the networked agents of DeepArcher dream into being an expanded virtual world that holds the possibility of contact with previously inaccessible bourne. The complicated security soft- and hardware of DeepArcher, designed to respond to and confound equally technological rationalizing efforts at mapping, tracking, and civilizing this wild realm, proves to open a space for escapes of all kinds, even from death. The novel, in fact, favors straightforward supernatural interpretations of online mysteries over contrived but nonetheless "secular explanations" and "secular backup stories" that depend on human-spun intrigue (*BE* 427, 441). After 9/11, Maxine turns as if by instinct to DeepArcher in her efforts to reach the lost, and finds what she's looking for. The presence of revenants, not unlike the meatspace "Thanatoids" who haunt Pynchon's earlier *Vineland* – victims of United States imperialist adventures at home and abroad – becomes a nonchalant fact of Internet life in the wake of the attacks. The narrator articulates this fantastic development explicitly: "Either it's Beltway tricksters out on maneuvers or the Internet has become a medium of communication between the worlds." (*BE* 427) The formulation of the sentence places greater weight on the second option, which is certainly the one Maxine would rather believe – to

Maxine, her own motives in trawling the net are "pathetically obvious" (*BE* 426). Though government involvement would appear to be a far more logical deduction, she counts her reportedly dead erstwhile lover Nicholas Windust as the "first author to suspect" in the apparent Windust-related hacking of her computer, irrational though it is: "[T]his is insane because Windust is dead." (*BE* 427) Maxine's inexplicable impulse is to look for the sinister Fed on the Deep Web, and she comes to believe that some surviving shade of Windust may be modifying the information about him in a digital file mysteriously passed along to her earlier in the novel. Windust, transformed from government agent into a spook of a different kind, plants new and flattering pieces of biography in the file. Shortly after this theory takes root, Maxine comes across another supposedly fallen acquaintance, the hapless Lester Traipse, and engages him in good faith: "[I]nstead of assuming it's a Lester impersonator with an agenda, or a bot preprogrammed with dialogue for all occasions, she sees no harm in treating him as a departed soul." (*BE* 427) The novel's account of their conversation toggles between an interpretation of Lester as a ghost and something more banal. He might be another person; he also refers to himself in terms that recall DeepArcher's agentive technology. "Just a mail-room scrambler here, remember?" (*BE* 428) he asks Maxine when she wants to know what death is like. The term recalls the "anonymous remailers" (*BE* 28) that protect DeepArcher, and all the other nonhuman cognitive agents that determine goings-on there. Technology blurs into resurrection.[31],[32]

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[31] Gibson's *Neuromancer* also features entities who have "flatlined" in the physical world but whose consciousnesses – or something indistinguishable from it – continue to persist in digital form, having been stored for that purpose. *Bleeding Edge*'s resurrections are never positively given this secular explanation, however.

[32] That the technologically-enabled virtual emerges as neutral ground "between worlds" after the thousands of 9/11 deaths does not seem accidental in light of the multimedia record of the day that remains. The results of instant reachability via technology, in even the most mortally extreme of situations, dominated the narrativization and understanding of the September eleventh events. Telephone calls, voicemails, and emails from victims trapped aboard hijacked planes or inside the burning World Trade Center supplied details of the event that would a few decades earlier have been

The Internet is then a space outside the ordinary assumptions of the human life cycle, a bardo or spirit world where metaphorical immortality through the digital record opens onto a possibility of digital perpetuation that is quite literal. Though Maxine's attempts to contact Traipse and Windust are at least in part efforts to gather more information, other DeepArcher users are there purely to take part in a new spiritual practice that the virtual world allows. Magic returns again through the fruits of the secular humanism that foreclosed it: online, the collaborative work of the living, the dead, and the nonliving incantations of code can offer new immortality:

> [L]ikenesses have been brought here by loved ones so they'll have an afterlife, their faces scanned in from family photos, some no more expressive than emoticons, others exhibiting an inventory of feeling ranging from party-euphoric through camera-shy to abjectly gloomy, some static, some animated in GIF loops, cyclical as karma, pirouetting, waving, eating or drinking whatever it was they were holding at the wedding or bar mitzvah or night out when the shutter blinked.
>
> *BE* 357-358

Commemorative uploads hoist the dead out of time and, it seems, out of death as well, recalling the "Missing" posters that papered New York City in the months after 9/11. DeepArcher, in sustaining these "refugees," seems to suspend or at least work around the finality of organisms, that most unyielding of supposed natural laws, by both providing a place for these remnants to go and

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lost to those who survived.[32] The recordings of these calls supply actual details but also, wrenchingly, give the experience of the dying an affective palpability, and even preserve a degree of afterlife agency for them: the anguished 911 calls of some victims were played at the sentencing trial of supposed "twentieth hijacker" Zacarias Moussaoui in 2006, allowing them to "testify" against the confessed conspirator. (See Melissa McNamara, "9/11 Tapes Evoke Horror, Heartbreak," CBS News, August 16, 2006.) Technology allows these victims to demand justice – or, alternatively, to be deployed strategically in the service of other ends. Maxine's new sense of a postmortem – or post-meatspace – reachability for those no longer in meatspace, and her own reactions to the deaths she sees close-up reflect the whiplash of contact with someone so close to death, seem to be informed by the unsettling role of technological communication in the attacks. The discovery of Lester Traipse's body leaves her reeling and yelling protests at the radio from which the report issues, and she cannot square his death with her own recent conversation with him, initiated over a cellphone call that a frightened Lester tells her is "the last" he plans to take. (*BE* 173) Her reaction to the news recalls the experiences reported by those who took calls from 9/11 victims only to see "the last moments of [their lives]" televised a moment later: "She just talked to him. He's supposed to be alive." (*BE* 198)

granting other visitors the perceptual equipment to "see" them. DeepArcher is an ontological leveler where even the slimmest suggestion of presence – an impression of a face like an "emoticon" – registers as body-defying "afterlife", as definite as anything else there. Moreover, these tributes seem to confer, at least as Maxine experiences them, a continued existence in itself. A spreading existential democracy informs reality in the virtually real world, where virtual presence suffices as real. When everyone "there" – if there they are – is merely code, as Maxine periodically reminds herself, real presence is no different for the encoded dead than for the encoded living. Maxine has the uncanny sense that the gifs and snapshots are more than just archival material: "Yet it's as if they want to engage – they get eye contact, smile, angle their heads inquisitively. 'Yes, what was it?' or 'Problem?' or "Not right now, OK?"' The narrator acknowledges that, "[i]f these are not the actual voices of the dead," they may say only "what the living want them to say," but even in the negative, the conditionality of this statement betrays at least some degree of subscription to a radical and fantastic possibility: these could be the actual voices of the dead. One may take the DeepArcher train, perhaps fittingly, to the place where the departed arrive. Buried among obscure intersections of the technological grid is a space where even those who have gone off the metaphysical grid, to say nothing of the technological, are apparently still able to get a signal.

Further, these mysterious new residents have gotten to work recontouring the virtual world for everyone, including the living. An avatar claiming to be that of DeepArchitect Lucas disavows any knowledge of the "unfolding flow of starscape[…]known elsewhere as the expanding universe," (*BE* 357) that Maxine finds after DeepArcher goes open source. "'It's nothin *we* wrote,"' Lucas avers, while acknowledging that more random clicking might bring her to the world's edge that early geographers feared: "'[D]own here, sooner or later someplace deep, there has to be a horizon between codes and codeless. An abyss."' There is no telling what rules apply in the endlessly modified world that humans, codes, pixels, and spirits produce together. Maxine might "'spend [her]

life dowsing the Void"' (*BE* 357) or stumble onto a portal that will take her out of secular time and space entirely.

Magic, thus aligned with the virtual world, enters the "real" world of Maxine's New York by way of the virtual's contagious spread into meatspace. "Pseudorandomness" already suits Maxine when the novel begins. Even mathematically verifiable randomness is suspect in her profession; paradoxically, a truly random distribution of numbers is not linearly random, and one obvious sign of a fraudster is an account wherein the numbers are *too* random. Flinty and skeptical though she is, she is primed to doubt random coincidence, to expect that logical intuitions may not apply. Before her Deep Web prowls begin, Maxine's meatspace world is already full of virtuality and analogized accordingly, experienced and described in terms reminiscent of transport around the Deep Web, where she is "crossfaded" from place to place. Maxine's meatspace movement around New York City and the wider world is frequently characterized in a way that makes her physical presence seem as evanescent as her Internet travels. At one point the narrator recalls that an earlier fraud investigation saw Maxine "manifested into Dorval," a phrasing evoking the surreal nature of air travel that can bring a New Yorker to Quebec for a few hours and then port her back with nearly the velocity and simplicity of typing a new "address" into a search bar. The "down there" of the subway that is Maxine's chief form of transport through meatspace New York parallels the "down there" of the Deep Web, a spatial analogy that is important to Eric Outfield, the paranoid hacker who will only meet (or "meet") contacts on the subway or the Deep Web.

Eric is one of a number of figures in Maxine's life who come and go in meatspace with an alacrity that defies the laws of physics and a timing too on-the-nose to be coincidental. The most fantastic of these figures is Marvin, the bike messenger who emerges into greater prominence as Maxine becomes further absorbed with Deep Web, and whose well-timed manifestations at

Maxine's apartment are left blithely unexplained: "Marvin has an uncanny history of always showing up with items Maxine knows she didn't order but which prove each time to be exactly what she needs." (*BE* 107) Marvin's timing is comically – and impossibly – exact, with deliveries ranging from the sinister to the frivolous: the day that Maxine meets Windust, he brings the flash drive that contains Windust's dossier; when Maxine's visiting ex-husband Horst announces a craving for an ice cream flavor discontinued in 1997, Marvin shows up minutes later with two quarts. He is bound by principles of affect rather than logic: "That's only the business page talkin, Mahxine," he tells her when she protests the ice cream in disbelief. "This is desire." (*BE* 132) Maxine accepts this magic as commensurate with, rather than separate from, the "secular" world and its human players, and indeed spends less time questioning supernatural elements of meatspace than she does worrying about wholly natural malign forces that may be on the move: "[M]aybe Marvin is some kind of otherworldly messenger, an angel even, but whatever unseen forces may be employing him at the moment, she's obliged to ask professional questions, such as how in secular space might the data-storage gizmo have found its way to Marvin? Gabriel Ice?[…T]he CIA or whoever? Windust himself?" (*BE* 111) Unsurprisingly, then, Marvin's deliveries lead her smoothly into the enchanted virtual world and back out again into an increasingly virtual and increasingly enchanted real one.

The formerly "secular" materials of everyday offline life are thus perceived as codable and re-codable. In this way, enchantment comes to meatspace. Human minds can be reprogrammed and controlled as if by spells via MKUltra and related secret governmental projects, one of which is rumored to involve actual time travel.[33] Laws of physics are bent, the faits accomplis of economics and politics rearranged, as Marvin explains, by sheer desire. The technological imposition of desire

[33] It is probably not coincidental that conspiracy theories of the sort that eventually invade Maxine's meatspace life flourish and spread on the Internet, the MKUltra project being a favorite hobbyhorse of online conspiracy theorists.

and imagination onto reality guides the manyhanded fabrication of DeepArcher and all other virtual landscapes; by the time a democratic assortment of "smartasses, yups, tourists, and twits" have descended on an ever-fluctuating DeepArcher "writing code for whatever they think they want and installing it, till some other headcase finds it and deinstalls it," (*BE* 403) Marvin has long ago established that installation in the real world is as simple as knowing what you think you want and writing the code – peanut butter cookie dough ice cream, for instance. Banal though they are, the miracles accelerate in the "postmagical winter" that follows 9/11: "counterfactual elements have started popping up like li'l goombas," (429) among them the incidence of a plastic takeout container lid that rolls down the street on "an edge thin as a predawn dream," held upright "for an implausible distance" by "the airflow[…]unless it's some nerd at a keyboard"; heeds a traffic light; and then continues on its way. "Real? Computer-animated?" asks the narrator. (*BE* 429-430) The event may just be "implausible" and not impossible, though it is followed by an encounter with a business acquaintance who dons a purported "invisibility ring" and promptly disappears as seamlessly as logging out. The day is left irreparably ruptured "by this what-is-reality issue." (*BE* 430-431)

Ultimately, Maxine seems not just to accept but even to favor a fantastically rearrangeable reality. Such a reality doesn't do closure any more than DeepArcher does metaphysical, but Maxine approaches something like a dénouement when she runs into Windust's long-disappeared Guatemalan first wife in Manhattan. The wildly unlikely connection comes when she makes chance eye contact with a complete stranger as they pass each other on subway trains headed opposite directions, but Maxine seems not to have much investment in rationalizing reality, and even to favor the irrational in explaining their meeting: "There are always secular backup stories, some comm link in Xiomara's shoulder bag, not yet on the market outside the surveillance community…but at the same time there's no shame in going for a magical explanation, so Maxine lets it ride." The "they" who Xiomara assures Maxine "know how to find people," may be double-agent government

operatives, but Maxine is just as happy, apparently, to imagine that they could be something else entirely – the post-secular "unseen forces" behind Marvin, for instance. (*BE* 440-441) The revelation is as close to happy as the novel comes: Xiomara, rebel against and long-presumed victim of United States imperialism, appears to have survived, a resistance in itself.

Survival, quiet and comprehensive persistence for even the long-lost, is what the virtual world seems to make possible, and what virtual magical realism offers as well. Critical work on Pynchon has made much of the Calvinist motif of the preterite and elect in his fiction, an invisible divide between the predestined damned and saved that is continually thematized in *Gravity's Rainbow* and implicit other novels, especially in *Vineland*'s recurrent question "Who was saved?" *Vineland*'s ending has been read as at least partially, though inconclusively, redemptive, with the restoration of its central multigenerational family.[34] A redemptive reading is possible for *Bleeding Edge* that is both far wider in scale and yet decidedly posthuman, and thus perhaps more unsettling than the ambiguous but cozy redemption of *Vineland*.[35] The virtual magical meatspace world offers a kind of salvation, or salvageability, albeit not a traditional metaphysical sort. This banal but miraculous salvation echoes the salvation available to human and nonhuman occupants of the Deep Web, where it seems at least in *Bleeding Edge*'s telling that everything and everyone who has been can abide and be found if you know where to look, and the messianic promise (or threat) that all things concealed will be made known finds unorthodox fulfillment.

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[34] N. Katherine Hayles, "'Who Was Saved?': Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*," in *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel*, ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), 26-27.

[35] Certainly, not all critics accept a redemptive reading of *Vineland*; Molly Hite's analysis of an apparently innate impulse to submit to authoritarian figures among the novel's radical women suggests that Prairie's ambivalent expulsion of the fascist Brock Vond is far from permanent and the family's next generation remains at risk. See Molly Hite, "Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*," in *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel*, ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994).

To be sure, in addition to the revelation of Xiomara, Maxine's family *is* at least tentatively restored by the end of the novel, with the return of the never-too-estranged Horst. The endurance of Horst and Xiomara among the 9/11 ashes, however, is literally overshadowed by the enduring presence, before and after the attacks, of the nonhuman things and beings that have survived their apparent loss, persisting past human use and awareness like the vast data reserves of the net. Objects and landscapes themselves acquire a fantastic nimbus in this way; even the most accidental of human-made landscapes can become, like Ava's swamp, virtual and seemingly magical. The parallel is explicitly drawn early in the novel, when a drug-running scrape brings Maxine down the Hudson to the Fresh Kills Landfill at night, a "lofty mountain range of waste" (*BE* 166) that hides an improbably picturesque 100 acres of protected marshland. The objects she has discarded confront Maxine here, a persistence that for her suggests, improbably, the possibility of new cosmological dispensation:

> Every Fairway bag full of potato peels, coffee grounds, uneaten Chinese food, used tissues and tampons and paper napkins and disposable diapers, fruit gone bad, yogurt past its sell-by date that Maxine has ever thrown away is up in there someplace, multiplied by everybody in the city she knows, multiplied by everybody she doesn't know, since 1948, before she was even born, and what she thought was lost and out of her life has only entered a collective history, which is like being Jewish and finding out that death is not the end of everything – suddenly denied the comfort of absolute zero.
>
> *BE* 166-167

The endurance in the dump of her intimate and yet discarded objects is unnerving to Maxine; she reacts with something like guilt at the thought that the slate can never be wiped clean. Future guilt and waste waits in the neighboring marsh, onto which Maxine superimposes the depredations of developers, foretold by the "looming and prophetic landfill." (*BE* 167) The lost preterite remain as if in judgment, hanging over the people of New York City and the protected Isle of Meadows.

All parts of this "collective history" (*BE* 167) remain at least theoretically salvageable, and the wetlands are at least temporarily masked from human spoliation by the landfill, remaining as a

testament to a pre-urban river, but salvation itself is an ambiguous matter, an uncomfortable one for Maxine. The preservation of the pristine marsh is more palatable than the preservation represented by the fallen-world landscape of the landfill; the marsh seems to represent a prelapsarian remnant, a landscape from a different dispensational age before salvation and damnation. The landfill speaks of human culpability, though it also suggests a limit to human power: its contents can never be wholly destroyed and continue to exert a claim on those who have thrown them away. The endurance of waste things in the landfill – though the novel does not say it – will soon become a source of similar distress but also relief and solace to many not long after Maxine's visit: we know that Fresh Kills will soon be reopened to serve as final resting place for much of the World Trade Center debris. Sifted over the months to come, Fresh Kills will yield personal effects and human remains, allowing for an at least physical redemption of victims to their families, a rescue – variously painful and palliative for survivors – from the absolute zeroing of the Ground Zero collapse. For many they will hold a numinous significance, a link to the dead, a closing statement, a late-breaking communication from beyond. The knowledge of these impending postsecular relics, superimposed onto the scene, constitutes a kind of Deleuzian virtual landscape, "circl[ing]" ever closer to the actual.[36]

Maxine's reaction to the Fresh Kills' "foul incoherence" (*BE* 167) seems to issue from a prescient sense of that circling, the current and impending possibilities of the landfill. Her ability to see the landfill as a virtual and a postsecular landscape – to imagine the particulars that lie within the dump as well as a nebulous intuition about the further "collective history" to be collected there – appears to arise from her experience of online life. The connection is made explicitly, even somewhat heavy-headedly, before she leaves: "The little island reminds her of something[…]As if you could reach into the [landfill] and find a set of invisible links to click on and be crossfaded at last

[36] Gilles Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual," trans. Eliot Ross Albert, in Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 148-149.

to unexpected refuge, a piece of the ancient estuary exempt from what happened[…]Like the Island of the Meadows, DeepArcher also has developers after it[…]corporate Web crawlers itching to index and corrupt another patch of sanctuary from their own far-from-selfless ends." (*BE* 167) Though Maxine's focus is on what she takes for romantic pastoral spaces that precede the salvation-damnation binary, two analogies are implied: The Isle of Meadows is likened to DeepArcher, leaving the landfill analogous to the rest of the Internet or at least the rest of the Deep Web.

The safe spirit world of DeepArcher amid the sedimentary data layers of the Internet echo the physical dump and the marsh and follow through on the hints of immortality and decidedly unmetaphysical salvation that Fresh Kills offers but at most can only partially deliver. Salvation, salvaging, or some sacred-secular, supernatural-natural hybrid of the two begins in the meatspace world and is more fully realized in the virtual, a process that goes smoothly as the worlds become more and more continuous in Maxine's experience of them. As the physical landfill mounts with 9/11 debris, DeepArcher becomes a place to sort through and make spiritual sense of rubble and personal effects in a way that New Yorkers confronted with the physical dump and marsh are unable to do; it also offers a consolatory possibility of resurrection, reconstruction, and reach- or searchability, a stay against natural decay.

As the landfill of persisting things indicates, post-secular, virtual magic salvation and resurrection applies to the nonhuman as well as the human, and to collectives of beings, things, and events rather than discrete human souls. Maxine's meatspace is narrated from the start in a post-secular register as an array of preterite spaces – buildings, neighborhoods, whole cities – that are not so much haunted as damned in themselves, beyond the redemption of secular and sacred efforts alike. Meatspace operates according to a typically post-secular hodgepodge of cosmologies, borrowing from Hindu moral teachings as well as Christian salvific divides. Karmic accounts

figurative and apparently literal are open and frequently out of balance, from the calculable "[r]eal-estate karma" that locals in the Hamptons tell Maxine adheres to any house as large as Gabriel Ice's country retreat, the construction of which inevitably meant razing smaller houses, to the more abstract "melancholy karma" of the Haiti-Dominican Republic border. (*BE* 15) The "karmically challenged" (*BE* 27) Deseret apartment building emerges as a central agent, if not a character, in the narrative. The Deseret is rendered as a Gothic hellmouth – complete with a light-swallowing "unappeasable maw" of an entranceway and "turrets, balconies, gargoyles, scaled and serpentine and fanged creatures in cast iron" – where elevators redirect passengers in an effort to attend to unfinished business. (*BE* 27)

Bleeding Edge suggests that, like people, some essences of buildings and places can be translated online and even redeemed, restored to prelapsarian wholeness in the spirit world of DeepArcher. What is physically beyond recovery for reasons of practicality or practicability in meatspace can be summoned back in virtual form. Persistence in meatspace looks like uncontrollable, overwhelming accumulation and disorganization: the Fresh Kills dump, the disorienting Deseret. Virtualized persistence allows for endless proliferation without the loss of organization and function. Perhaps nothing short of demolition can redeem the Deseret in meatspace, but buildings, neighborhoods, and whole metropolises lost to time, gentrification, or terrorist violence can rise again, millennially perfected, online. Large constructions can go up without displacing small ones in a space that expands as required; irrevocable changes can be undone, as when one reverts to a previous saved version of a file. The nonhuman ghost of the city itself is another refugee from meatspace after 9/11. Significantly, it is two of the youngest New Yorkers, Maxine's sons Ziggy and Otis, who appear to make most effective use of this

reconstructive capacity, picking through a virtual wasteland described in language that evokes the "toxic" dump.[37]

Ziggy and Otis find their way down to DeepArcher to construct a consolatory city thought lost forever even before the World Trade Center attacks and perhaps always fantastical:

> [S]omehow the boys have located graphics files for a version of NYC as it was before 11 September 2001 […]Somebody somewhere in the world, enjoying that mysterious exemption from time which produces most Internet content, has been patiently coding together these vehicles and streets, this city that can never be. The old Hayden Planetarium, the pre-Trump Commodore Hotel, upper-Broadway cafeterias that have not existed for years, smorgasbords and bars offering free lunches[…]"
> *BE* 428

The list swells into a paragraph of nostalgic description, all to some degree mythical as a free lunch, where Maxine's sons explore "unconcerned for their safety, salvation, destiny." (*BE* 429) However tongue-in-cheek the remark about exemptions from time, it suggests that, like Isle of Meadows, "Zigotisopolis" is born suspended out of secular time, operating, likewise, under an older dispensation. Virtual magical realism means that, at least from the point of view of Ziggy and Otis, the pre-9/11 New York City is always available; this version vies with their mother's meatspace version of a saved and never gone New York in the landfill. Amid the "foul incoherence" of the Internet, all the information ever thought to have been thrown away, lost, out of everyone's life remains searchable, clickable, somewhere online. The stakes of this preservation go well beyond nostalgia, however, enabling Maxine's attempts to trace secret histories and sniff out fraud. A technological fantastic that offers the restorative possibility of political and supernatural

[37] "[…]leaving the surface-Net crawlers busy overhead slithering link to link, leaving behind the banners and pop-ups and user groups and self-replicating chat rooms[…]cruising among the co-opted blocks of address space with cyberthugs guarding the perimeters, spammer operation centers, video games one way or another deemed too violent or offensive or intensely beautiful for the market as currently defined[and] forbidden expressions of desire, beginning with kiddie porn and growing even more toxic from there." (*BE* 240)

rectifications alike is at odds with the "technological sublime" that Fredric Jameson describes, and the dark re-enchantment of technology that McClure identifies in critical work on Pynchon's earlier novels.

At the same time, too sanguine a reading of DeepArcher and its enchantments risks accepting a narrative that, for the most part, is in fact blatantly unrepresentative of what is actually happening in the story world of the novel. Maxine's credulous engagement online is underscored by the novel's treatment of that engagement. From the beginning, Maxine's activity online is narrated in surprisingly conventional form that represents virtual events as if they are what they have been coded to represent onscreen; if Maxine's activity is digital, the narrative of it is for the most part analog. The result is a new world that, however mysterious, presents itself as utterly familiar. So does the narrative: its setting and subject matter are arguably experimental, but its formal strategy is seductively straightforward. The narration of Maxine's travels is striking in that it isn't striking: the narrative style and form do not differ in any notable way from those employed for the events of the novel that take place in the "meatspace" of the offline world. As if recapitulating the experience of accessing an online community and then quickly becoming lost in it, the novel gives us moments of opacity, when the technological interface is palpable – Maxine must log in, "windows" pop up, screens go dark and illuminate – but once inside DeepArcher, she seems to engage with a physical world. Her conversations within DeepArcher are formatted like the "meatspace" dialogue of the novel. She "wander[s] the corridors," "stops at a corner café," "finds empty liquor bottles and syringes," when she is merely clicking and watching coded representations of these things. (*BE* 355-357) Just how they are represented – graphics, text, video? – is left unclear, as is the degree to which Maxine is taken in and experiences the represented landscape and events as real. The reader, however, can only contest the reliability of the DeepArcher narrative sequences by constantly

reminding him or herself to ignore and to doubt every word of them; engagement seems the better reading strategy.

To narrate virtual-world events in the same terms typically used for events that take place offline is to collapse and obscure the mediating metaphors of online activity, to risk losing sight of reality even in attempting to depict its expansion, and to force an epistemological crisis for readers that may ultimately be unproductive because insurmountable. The Todorovian question "Did that really happen?" becomes trickier; what does "really" mean, or "happen," for that matter? Is it right to say Maxine stops at a corner café when in one sense we know she does no such thing? Occupying DeepArcher is presented as a commensurate alternative to occupying New York City; to log out of DeepArcher is to be "back in meatspace,"(*BE* 233, 426) implying that Maxine has been gone from meatspace when in fact she has presumably been in meatspace, in a post-9/11 New York, the entire time. One is an acceptable substitute for the other: poking around illegally in the bunker below the Long Island estate of a Hashslingrz executive is explicitly framed as interchangeable with a late-night trip into locked-down portions of Deep Web: "If it isn't one of the underground rooms she saw out at Montauk, it'll do." (*BE* 242) Readers must either keep in view, at all times, that they are being misled with every word, or they can accept the naïve account of DeepArcher and even allow it to restructure their understanding of the novel's meatspace episodes in the way that it does for Maxine. Her tolerance for the unbelievable or fantastic in meatspace rises as she flirts with the idea that meatspace itself may be a simulation, subject to all the seemingly miraculous activity that a programmer can imagine.

Magical virtual realism in *Bleeding Edge* is predicated upon what Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, in their consideration of new information-technology media, call "transparency" of use. Computer programmers, Bolter and Gromala write, tend to produce interfaces that aspire to

invisibility. The "disappearing computer"[38] offers information and workspace to users via "transparent window[s] onto a world of data";[39] they look "through" and not "at" computer screens, as readers typically look through and not at the page.[40] Most of the time, Maxine looks through and not at her computer, as if through a portal into DeepArcher. Maxine's mode of engagement, though, is arguably less important than the way the narrative itself works, which is by recapitulating that transparent engagement and, most of the time, giving the reader no choice in the matter. Computers disappear from the text; as Maxine's Deep Web interludes grow longer, there are more pages between mentions of the fact that a computer is mediating the excursion, and sometimes these passages are not even bookended by explicit mentions of Maxine logging on or off. We are not encouraged to distinguish between Maxine's meatspace and DeepArcher perambulations; we are led to lose the metaphor and regard events in meatspace and events online as qualitatively the same. The risk is that complete transparency, as Bolter and Gromala argue, is a liability. To trust the information delivered without regard to or knowledge of the functioning of the delivery system itself is to forget that "the system may fail precisely in a way that masks its own failure"[41]: it may be giving information about its own workings that is unsound. Maxine may be the victim of just such a failure; we as readers may, as well, be dealing with a text that reports its own workings wrongly. This failure may be in the programming or the hardware of the system, though the examples Bolter and Gromala that do not involve primary hardware failures ultimately lead to secondary hardware failures with dramatic material effects, such as the Three Mile Island disaster. Magical virtual realism raises a particular form of this problem: accepting fantastic events that defy materiality uncritically,

[38] Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 6.
[39] Bolter and Gromala, 35.
[40] Bolter and Gromala, 35-37.
[41] Bolter and Gromala, 54.

online or in meatspace, requires ignoring what is actually, verifiably going on, or at the very least speculating wildly about its meaning.

The material is a problem for the novel. Magical virtual realist landscapes online involve the unpredictable and unbiddable influence of materiality, a fact that goes unacknowledged most of the time. Technological hardware and the meat of "meatspace" are important determinative components of the magical virtual real; software function depends on hardware condition and use, and vice versa. *Bleeding Edge* remembers this ambivalently, segueing in and out of meat- and cyberspace with a casual fluidity that emphasizes their imbrication, one reality's dependence on the other, without hierarchizing them clearly. The Todorovian diagnostic question is also often at work in *Bleeding Edge* when the reader is left to wonder what has taken place in the online and what in the flesh-and-blood world. Distinguishing is a particular challenge when a description provides details that seem unlikely in a simulated space, however meticulous its designer, as in the case of the Montauk stand-in:

> It isn't a promising neighborhood[…]Broken remnants of old military installations, commands long deactivated, as if transmission towers for ghost traffic are still poised out on promontories far away in the secular dark, corroded, untended trusswork threaded in and out with vines and leaves of faded poison green, using abandoned tactical frequencies for operations long defunded into silence…Missiles meant for shooting down Russian prop-driven bombers, never deployed, lying around in pieces, as if picked over by some desperately poor population that comes out only in the deepest watches of the night. Gigantic vacuum-tube computers with half-acre footprints, gutted, all empty sockets and strewn wiring. Littered situation rooms, high-sixties plastic detailing gone brittle and yellow, radar consoles with hooded circular screens, desk still occupied by avatars of senior officers in front of flickering sector maps, upright and weaving like hypnotized snakes, images corrupted, paralyzed, passing to dust.
>
> *BE* 242

The passage still suggests a divide between meatspace and virtual, though it points to their inextricability as well: there is the implication of a physical and natural world in the "secular dark," where hardware potentially compromised by weather and organic life sustains this faulty but still active virtual space. It is impossible, however, to know how to read the subsequent descriptions of

objects. We might be inclined to expect that the "missiles" and derelict "vacuum-tube computers" are physical objects that the narrator is imagining in the same "secular dark" as the transmission towers; we might also expect that "situation rooms" evoked in extensive and depressing detail are real places from which this "neighborhood" was once accessed via giant primitive computers. The mention of "avatars of senior officers," however, suggests that this is all a simulated online environment, one that Maxine can see. Are the missile remnants simply graphics, then? Or are they blueprints that Maxine accesses? The undecidability of this passage is succinctly epitomized in its last line, the reference to images "corrupted" and "passing to dust." "Corruption" in current parlance suggests a breakdown in coded information – the "pattern" that defines virtuality for N. Katherine Hayles – more often than it does physical decomposition, while "dust" contains resonances of Biblical and philosophical reflections on impermanent material and decay, the condition of presence that Hayles opposes to the virtual.[42] What the fate of these situation rooms, missiles, and officers may be is left unclear: are they material that decomposes or information? The novel seems to point us toward asking the same question of the characters and of our own world. What is more "real," and what more lasting?

Nonetheless, the novel ends with a reminder of the limits that materiality – and the laws of physics – imposes on this virtual world, as well as the tenuous environmental position of meatspace: the heat generated by the workings of server hardware means that cold itself has become a sought-after commodity, with the shadowy Hashslingrz company launching imperialistic adventures northward to set up operations in the shrinking Arctic, where they won't have to pay for air conditioning. Renegade hacker Eric attributes material environmental changes to the "'virtuality creep'" that Maxine suspects, subordinating natural and human history alike to the occult

[42] Cf. note 29.

interventions of government time travelers – "'so whenever we see things begin to break up, pixelate and flicker, bad history nobody saw coming, even weather getting funny, it's because the special time-ops folks have been out meddling." – but as Eric himself finds, there is the promise of sanctuary in the material as well, which can be leveraged against technological surveillance and control. (*BE* 431-432) Persecuted and on the run by the end of the novel, Eric and his cinematographer partner Reg escape through physical exile that evokes an old American myth of escape: migration westward, where they manage to lose their pursuers behind mountains rather than firewalls. Maxine expects Eric to escape into virtuality, a gradual slide "deeper into the Deep Web," but his disappearance instead registers like a power blackout: "abruptly and silent." It is a "classic skip," says the narrator, a turn of phrase that suggests it is old-fashioned in its low-tech materiality and also evokes the skipping of a damaged disc, a material flaw that frustrates the transmission of information. (*BE* 433) Mountains can break the signal and the spell of the Internet.

While this ending bears some resemblance to Tyrone Slothrop's pastoral retreat to the Vermont mountains, lost does not exactly mean off the grid here; we are not completely returned to a "secular" meatspace, but one where the material and the virtual are braided together. Maxine learns Eric's fate from footage, again delivered, impossibly, by the serendipitous Martin, that shows Eric and Reg "risen from the deep or wherever" and aboard a "rolling server farm," that is, per Eric, "'out on the move and untrackable 24/7.'" (*BE* 436-437) From their exile they are able to deploy a hybrid strategy of resistance that combines a virtual front with a necessary material awareness, allowing them a virtual invisibility, pursuing an agenda that may be a prelude to the "civil war" for the free Internet that Eric touts like a cyber Canaan: "'the real one, the dream, the promise.'" (*BE* 436) They are at once "'up around the Bozeman Pass,'" in Maxine's husband's assessment, using constant physical movement to stay undetected, and "'down where you might not want to be bringing your family computer,'" a double concealment. (*BE* 437-438) Maxine's leftist activist friend

March Kelleher employs a similar strategy on a smaller scale, going underground while staying in New York and continuing her work of researching and publicizing government secrets on the Internet via "free Wi-Fi hotspots" around the city. (*BE* 406) The probably-unworkable notion that even guerilla bloggers like March can escape detection and fight for freedom by pirating Internet signals – on her iBook, no less – is a kind of comic happy idea, as is Eric and Reg's flight to the west and their peripatetic rogue server farm, a fantasy of two lawless frontiers at once.

Another faction, a pair of Russian hackers with ambiguous loyalties, scores a small victory over Hashslingrz at last with a physical attack on the company's upstate server farm that disrupts Hashslingrz's control of the virtual world. Told of the plan, Maxine expresses surprise that the two will be physically present rather than "'a little further away, like on the Internet'"; they respond that they prefer a "'[m]ore personal'" approach. (*BE* 460) The subsequent electromagnetic pulse they deploy leaves networked electronics "out to an unknown radius[…]apocalyptically dark," an event described not only as a disruption of technology but a consequent disruption, at least in the small test zone of influence (they hint that they are capable of much stronger pulses) of the partially virtual reality that has pervaded the world: "[A]ll forms of reality in which the basic unit is the pixel, all of it gone down without a sigh into the frozen midwatch hour." (*BE* 468) To interfere with the virtual is now to interfere with reality itself, and even to jump timelines, perhaps from "bad history" to better. (*BE* 193) In this moment of technological warfare, the narrator implies that the cosmos of the dispossessed American Indians who once inhabited the land on which the server farm was built, and whose legends warn of demons and ghosts that haunt the lake nearby, may even be made accessible again: "Maybe it was only the failure of one repeater up on a ridgeline, but it might as well have been the world that got reset, for that brief cycle, to the slow drumbeat of Iroquois pre-history." (*BE* 468) *Bleeding Edge* imagines that technological savvy and manipulation of virtual reality can lend themselves as much to political resistance as to control, and can indeed subvert a cynical, secular

capitalist world to find numinous meaning and even immortality. The integration of a virtual world with meatspace can open, rather than close off, zones of spirituality and magic.

Swamplandia!

The teeming swamp beyond Ava Bigtree's island home is a virtual landscape not unlike the more obvious virtual space of DeepArcher, dreamed and redreamed by multiple agents. The mainland or "dryland" that lies a ferry ride away serves as counterpoint to this virtual magical world much like *Bleeding Edge*'s meatspace: dryland and meatspace have, at least at first, more literal solidity than the swamp and DeepArcher, though each appears to be ontologically continuous with its respective counterpart. Like DeepArcher, the swamp's contours are in flux, constantly changing in response to forces that Russell frames with a series of active, deliberate verbs imparting creative and destructive agency to their subjects: mangroves "hugged the soil and vegetation into pond-lily islands," gales "tore the infant matter apart," tides "maniacally revised the coastlines." (*S!* 23) As with the agents, human and nonhuman, who participate in DeepArcher, these forces compose "the swamp" and threaten to make it something else entirely, rendering it unrecognizable across time.

Moreover, though technology remains mostly invisible in the swamp, its effect on the landscape is as determinative as the technology that enables DeepArcher. The priority of nonhuman natural forces over technologized human interference is not even clearly established: the nonhuman swamp as Ava knows it has been produced in large part by the technologically-enacted desires that humans project onto the swamp. Such desires can transform the swamp and reroute natural processes; however, like transformative spells, their consequences are unpredictable. Further, these attempts to break the natural order have an accelerative effect: they produce a swamp that is more supernatural and more uncannily agentive in its own right. Human attempts to renegotiate the swamp's material reality through technology have loosed a rampaging force that makes the swamp a place of resistant mystery and terrifying, wrathful, unpredictable comeuppance:

Water once flowed out of Lake Okeechobee without interruption, or interference, from men. Aspiring farmers wanted to challenge her blue hegemony. All that peat beneath the lakes was going to waste! *Melaleuca quinquenervia* was an Australian tree imported to suck the Florida swamp dry. If you were a swamp kid, you were weaned on the story of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, these men who had flown over the swamps in tiny Cessnas and sprinkled melaleuca seeds out of restaurant salt and pepper shakers[…]The Army Corps of Engineers had planted thousands of melaleuca trees in the 1940s as part of their Drainage Project, back when the government thought it was possible to turn our tree islands into a pleated yellowland of crops. The dikes and levees that the Army Corps had recommended for flood control had turned the last virgin mahogany stands into dust bowls; in other places, wildfire burned the peat beds down to witchy fingers of lime.

Now the melaleuca had formed an "impermeable monoculture"[…]Forest fires raged and burned the swamp down to peat. Frosts came and a man could break his knife trying to slice through a glade tomato. By 1950, the dream of drainage was largely dead. The Army Corps of Engineers changed its objective from draining the "wastelands" of the swamp islands to saving them. Unfortunately for my family, the melaleucas remained root-committed to the original plan. They swallowed fifty acres a day[…]We kept cutting them down, and the earth kept raising them. It was a haywire fertility, like a body making cancer.

(*S!* 96-97)

The governmental project of "reclamation" – first a disastrous attempt to remake the swamp into a credible imitation of the arable "yellowlands" elsewhere, and then an attempt to reset the swamp to its original condition – is itself reclaimed by the plants it has tried to instrumentalize. The melaleucas follow their own agenda, triumphing over the government and doing indefatigable battle with the remaining islanders. The passage blends the controlled language of scientific cause-and-effect description with a mythic rhetoric that ascribes a (largely perverse) will to the plants and the land. The chain-reaction of effects are carefully documented by Ava in the history she has learned by rote; she notes the scientific name of the plant. This empirical natural history is subverted, however, by the millennial language that frames the story: freed by flight technology to visualize the "yellowland" to be and to tamper with the existing landscape on a vast scale, the "Pilots of the Apocalypse" unleash a hyperbolic ecological upset. The weather itself seems to worsen as a result of the melaleucas, and the swamp is left scarred and "witchy." Ava and her fellow islanders fear the "menace" of the melaleuca, and perceive hostility and despair from the swamp itself: a visiting botanist tells Ava that the swamp is "writing her own suicide note."

Ava herself is moved to interfere in this order, to project her own transformative will upon it, by the hatching of an inexplicably red alligator. The animal begins its life already shaped by human technological manipulation: alligator sex is determined, Ava tells us, by the temperature at which an egg hatches, and the red alligator is one of a crop of hatchlings produced by an incubator set to "female," adjustable in accordance with the Swamplandia! park's needs. In the "red monster" Ava sees hope for the survival of Swamplandia!, a messianic sign; because it accompanies Ava on her dark search for the underworld in the swamp, it also acquires the air of an otherworldly, inscrutable guide. Its apparent unspeakability adds to its air of supernatural mystery: until she meets the similarly magical figure of the Bird Man, Ava does not tell anyone else about the red alligator, in the superstitious certainty that if she does, "it will die or disappear." Its arrival moves Ava to other seeming impossibilities: swooping down to rescue it from the natural fate it would have if released to the park, where its color would make it easy prey, she adopts it as a pet and seems to keep it alive through sheer force of will while all the other alligators who hatched in the same incubator die of infection. Like *Bleeding Edge*'s Horst, who can call up a pint of discontinued ice cream by leveraging "desire" over fact, and like the *Bleeding Edge* programmers who call "what they think they want" into being, (*BE* 132) Ava figures her protection of the alligator as an instance of desire-as-incantation, breaking natural law. She creates a simulation of the swamp in a tank, where the tiny, weak alligator is at the top of "a whole food chain" that Ava carefully maintains, feeding crickets to rats and rats to the alligator: "That was my first clue that love can warp a hierarchy: the whole pyramid got flipped on its head." (*S!* 61) There are hints that all of the Swamplandia! island itself is a version of this affect-warped hierarchy. Island populations, Ava's father points out, are "island tame," a liability, though islands foster the development of animals that wouldn't exist otherwise: "All kinds of wonderful crap can evolve here." (*S!* 36) Ava's father's name for his own adaptational strategy for Swamplandia! compares it to one of these warped island animals; Swamplandia will evolve to

compete with the mainland World of Darkness through "Carnival Darwinism." (*S!* 36) "Carnival" refers to the two amusement parks in question, but also suggests natural order turned upside down, the weak triumphing over the strong.

Ava's description of the swamp and its inhabitants might be dismissed as conventional, anthropomorphizing lyricism, its supernatural elements merely metaphorical, except that, in line with Ava's sinisterly agentive characterization of it, the swamp genuinely becomes a fantastic place where Ava's sister Ossie communicates with ghosts; Ava believes she can find the entrance to the actual underworld; and, in a flashback, government workers are attacked and carried off by mythically enormous buzzards. The impermeability of the swamp is both banally material and supernatural, and – to human consternation – resistant to communicative technology. Led by the mysterious Bird Man to find the underworld, Ava finds help completely out of range. Starting with Ava's inability to talk about the red alligator to her father and brother, who are on the mainland, the swamp cuts off reachability in both scientifically explicable and inexplicable ways, as the Bird Man implies with the story of two teenagers on an ill-fated cruise in "a similar nowhere" somewhere in the swamp:

> "Mikey got lost[…]He hit a tree that cut their gas line. He stranded them on the saw-grass prairie with food and water for one night. Bianca had a diabetic attack while they were waiting for Search and Rescue and she died, Ava. With all of their technology it was fourteen days before they found Mr. Michael Taylor, half-looney with his dead acquaintance in his arms[…]And don't forget, these are people who have gotten into bad scrapes, yes, but they are *here*. They are in our world. They *can* be found by Search and Rescue," he said slowly, checking my eyes for understanding.
>
> (*S!* 293)

The trees themselves attack the boat, and one passenger dies and the other is driven to near-madness in the indifferent swamp. The natural and supernatural hazards of the swamp run together in the Bird Man's account, and technological intervention cannot penetrate. Whether in the swamp proper or the swamp underworld, the effect is the same: there is no qualitative metaphysical difference between the remoteness of the swamp and the remoteness of the underworld. As Ava

and Ossie try to tell their father, the underworld isn't a heaven or hell separate from life on Earth, it is simply another country "'like a Germany,'" in Ossie's words, or "'like a woods,'" in Ava's. (*S!* 27)

The swamp and its natural actors confront human rationalizing efforts with a seemingly supernatural, uncanny intransigence. The swamp answers human interference with deliberate and terrifying shows of power that seem willful and moralistic: its counterattacks on overweening humans are the stuff of folklore or fairy tale, but they rebuke the human civilizing quest rather than affirming it. Such is the fate of a 1930's swamp dredging crew that attempts to cut a canal through the swamp to the Gulf of Mexico on behalf of the Model Land Company, an outfit whose name and mission – to "turn this morass into a real place" (*S!* 144) – suggests a will to reshape and even change the ontological status of the territory it targets in accordance with capitalistic fantasies. Ossie, claiming possession by a ghostly dredgeman, tells Ava the tall-tale-like Dredgeman's Revelation, wherein the crew are helplessly carried away, still alive, by monstrous buzzards. Following the recitation, flocks of giant buzzards mysteriously alight on Swamplandia as if summoned, the same birds that will, according to the Bird Man, be the "map" (*S!* 200) to conduct Ava to the underworld.

The acceptance of a map produced by the swamp itself is characteristic of the concessions the swamp demands even from human interlopers whose rationalizing designs on the swamp are less invasive, mere efforts to map, measure, or otherwise organize the swamp conceptually. Like time, the experience of space is irrational here, and space cannot be grasped or traversed by rational scientific or technological means and measures. Nor is the map, more time-specific event than isolable artifact, truly a map in any sense that cartographers could use: like the Bird Man's averbal, untranslatable exchanges with the birds, and like the moths that swarm Ava in "almost meaningful" (*S!* 116) formations that coincide with Ossie's possessions, it is one of the swamp's many virtualistic "patterns," (*S!* 240) the occult knowledge of which cannot be transferred by human-made artifact or

human language. The birds constitute a living, omniscient network that takes the place of technological means of location and navigation for supernatural travels. To "'track a ghost'" (*S!* 191) requires the substitution of a "static document like [a] paper map" with, as Ava realizes, a map that is "alive and legible above us, beating its wings." (*S!* 201) Much like the regularly changing passwords and shifting, un-retraceable links that protect the way to DeepArcher, the way to the underworld is by nature unmappable; "'the paths are always changing,'" the Bird Man explains. (*S!* 191) The Bird Man, himself an ambiguously supernatural figure who materializes out of the dank woods with a whistle that neither the birds nor Ava herself can resist, is a proficient user of such irrational guides, well accustomed to engaging with the swamp on the swamp's enchanted terms. An itinerant "avian pied piper," his legend precedes him: he is part of an elusive fraternity whose members follow and expel nuisance birds, a service that they are called on to perform even by the state government "when the more traditional methods of animal control are attempted, fail." (*S!* 163)

Engaging with the swamp's enchantments rather than attempting to work around them with rationalizing technology becomes compulsory as the novel continues, not an alternative but a necessity. The entrance of the Bird Man, in fact, and Ava's acceptance of the patterns he shows her, inaugurates the act of the novel during which Ava fully subscribes to Ossie's cosmology of spirits and spirit worlds, and has her own face-to-face with what may be a restless ghost. During these episodes, Ava is completely out of technological touch with her family and dryland authorities, a repeatedly-noted dearth of contact that drives the action; reaching the entranced Ossie and her mother in the underworld apparently means foregoing more mundane forms of reachability. This trade is figured explicitly when the Bird Man first draws the aptly-named Ava to him with the bewitching whistle, producing an uncanny sound that results in her inviting the feather-clad stranger across her threshold. This "call" ("'What bird are you calling?'" she asks, to which he replies, "'You.'" [*S!* 164) impairs Ava's ability to reach help through other calling, seeming to directly replace

her telephonic ability. The telephone is a conspicuous presence on the morning that the Bird Man agrees to search for Ossie with Ava. Ava, suspecting the Bird Man may not be "familiar with house technology," suggests that they "'call someone,'" (*S!* 189) but the Bird Man makes it clear that his help is contingent upon her not calling anyone else. His rationale shakes Ava's faith not just in the dryland authorities who won't believe her but in the telephone itself to put her in touch with anyone useful "[T]hey are not going to believe you. Not Park Services, not anybody who you contact on the mainland. And their technologies aren't going to find her either[…]Not if she's headed to the underworld with this ghost." (*S!* 189) No one accessible by telephone has the resources that Ava needs; the very fact that they are reachable by telephone seems to be proof enough that they won't be any use.

Indeed, Ava's narration suggests that she cannot tell anyone else about her dilemma not so much because she fears the response of the adults but because the problem simply cannot be communicated over telephone lines, just as her red alligator cannot be spoken of over them; "I couldn't tell the telephone what I'd done – losing Ossie to an invisible kidnapper," she says, as if the instrument itself excludes the relation of such a fantastic event. Her older brother Kiwi, Ava knows, "would be on the phone" in this situation, "[b]ut Kiwi hadn't heard this Bird Man calling to me in the woods[…]and just the memory of that sound caused many bright fibers I had not known existed inside me to tighten." (*S!* 189-190) One "call" is analogically exchanged for another in this transaction; the analogy can even be extended to the numinous "fibers" within Ava that transmit and receive as if in lieu of fiber optic cables. (*S!* 190) The technological usurpation is complete when Ava deliberately leaves the house telephone off the hook, to give her father the impression, if he calls, that she or Ossie is home and using the phone, not that they are out of range and unable to pick up. Suspending this line appears to be a necessary step if Ava is to connect over another one and find her ghost-smitten sister. Ava's assessment of Ossie's mental state suggests that she thinks

Ossie, to mix technological metaphors, is not crazy but simply on another frequency that Ava must find, tuning out of the rational world: "Madness, as I understood it from books, meant a person who was open to the high white whine of *everything*," Ava says, arguing even as retrospective narrator that Ossie's supernatural world is too unified, too disciplined – a clear broadcast – to be mere "fantasy." (*S!* 197)

The novel's denouement involves what appears to be a traditional romantic rationalization that effectively brings the Bigtree family back onto the grid. Ava, following her rape by the Bird Man, deems the underworld "a big hoax" (*S!* 341) and strikes out for home. She is finally able to make some use of the skills she learned in the simulated swamp of Swamplandia!: her escape from the swamp culminates with her diving into alligator-infested waters and swimming through an underwater tunnel to safety in a wild unsupervised recreation of her mother's famous act. Technologies, as it turns out, are some help after all: the park rangers do manage to locate Ava, and her first indication of their presence is the sound of "[s]omeone real on a walkie-talkie." (*S!* 384) Search and rescue tech comes through for Ossie too: Kiwi, trained at the World of Darkness theme park to fly a plane, finds her on the remote Calusa shell mounds.

However, this ending does not suggest a tamed, rationalized world so much as it does one that has simply been bracketed again. The adult Ava claims to not believe in ghosts anymore, in the final pages of the novel after narrating the siblings' reunion with their father and outlining their subsequent new life on the mainland. Nonetheless, Ava's adult skepticism is more a product of repression than actual disbelief: she never discusses the Bird Man, the red alligator, or any of the other mysterious events of her summer with her father. These figures continue to haunt her waking and her dream life, leaving her fearful at the cries of "strange birds" that the Bird Man has come for her, "[e]ven deep inland." She tempers her proclamation of disbelief with the assertion that

"something more mysterious might be happening, less articulable than any of the captioned and numeraled drawings in *The Spiritist's Telegraph*. Mothers burning inside the risen suns of their children." (*S!* 394-395) There is a sentimental reading of this statement of belief: it seems to refer partly to Ava's sense that her mother lives on within her. I maintain that there is also a more complex and interesting interpretation, both of the "something more mysterious" that Ava thinks may be in progress and of the presence that Ava senses within herself.

Ava's adult belief in a mysterious but not exactly ghostly world is set up by two numinous moments of contact that occur after Ava loses faith in the Bird Man and the underworld where she has hoped to see her mother again as a ghost. The more consolatory moment comes during Ava's swim away from the Bird Man and the alligators, when she is granted the literal "buoyancy" she needs to survive. (*S!* 389) That buoyancy, ordinarily a simple matter of physics, occupies Ava's thoughts afterward to a degree that suggests it was somehow outside the ordinary physical order. Ava attributes this fantastic property to her mother: "I believe I met my mother there, in the final instant. Not her ghost but some vaster portion of her, her self boundlessly recharged beneath the water." (*S!* 389) Part of that self still seems to have been intact and anthropomorphically individual; Ava's mother "must have lent me some of [her courage]," Ava tells the reader. (*S!* 389) Other aspects of Ava's maternal rescue are notably depersonalized, while still described in active agentive language, and more ambiguous in their motives. Ava speaks of having been "forced […] toward the surface," as if without a choice. ((*S!* 389) "She was the muscular current that rode me through the water away from the den," delivering her from the alligators, (*S!* 389) but Ava also implicates this "vaster portion" of her mother in more neutral aspects of the swim. In the initial description of the escape's aftermath, Ava sadly realizes she has lost the talismanic scrap of her mother's dress that she has been carrying since discovering it in the swamp. Here, she implicates her mother in its loss: "She was the water that eased the clothes from my fingers." (*S!* 389) The action is not particularly helpful

in the circumstances; nor is it clearly motivated in regard to Ava. Framed in these terms, Ava's survival comes off more as a byproduct of forces that act on her toward their own inscrutable ends; Ava is incidental to the coalescence of these forces.

Ava's mother's return, then, is not exactly the common enough (and even banal) benevolent image of a dead loved one as a continued protective presence dispersed and felt in the natural world, a somewhat less sentimental version of which takes place with Tyrone Slothrop's subversive dispersal at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Ava's clarification that her mother's surviving "self" is not a revenant spirit or soul but a "vaster portion" of her mother, implies, paradoxically, that what she encounters is not quite her mother as Ava knew her. A "vaster portion" than whatever comprises a "ghost" would seem to necessitate some material presence, and Ava's experience with her mother is certainly thickly material, and centers around an improbable or impossible physical event: Ava's inexhaustible buoyancy. What a "vaster" mother looks like, however, is unclear: the implication is that this is Ava's mother augmented in some way, making her more than she was when Ava knew her, and thus necessarily *not* exclusively her mother, but her mother and something else – she exists now as an additive being. Complicated in this way, Ava's communion with her mother is less straightforwardly consolatory.

This becomes especially clear when it is paired with Ava's other post-Bird Man encounter with a mysterious woman whom Ava suspects is Mama Weeds, the fabled ghost of a black woman murdered by white men during the Depression. Ava stumbles across this woman living, inexplicably, in the remotest part of the swamp, and wearing her mother's old dress. In one unsettling moment of eye contact, the woman appears to have not eyes but empty portals onto irrational, nonhuman eternity: "landscape: no pupil or colored hoop of iris but the great swamp[…]a world of sawgrass and no people[…]a nothing that rolled forward forcefully forever." (*S!* 364) This eternal emptiness is

paradoxical: Ava claims to have seen "nothing" because she sees "nobody" (*S!* 364) but retains the impression of an agentive velocity. Forces are on the move without human impetus, in spaces that roll beyond human ability to witness or imagine. The woman – whom Ava continues to suspect may not have been "only a woman" – emanates "a deep clay smell," a sensory detail that aligns her with the earth itself, with all its nonhuman, unknowable spaces. (*S!* 364) Like Ava's mother, this is an additive being; somehow, what remains is greater than what originally was. Beyond her human form, she has acquired a vaster materiality that connects her to the otherworldly vastness that Ava sees, indicated in Ava's description of the unmaking of Mama Weeds' mortal body after death: "Wind unstitched her skeleton. Weeds sprayed outward from the heart-shaped wreck of her pelvis; a sinkhole opened beneath her and gave way with the suddenness of caved ice, swallowing her bones." (*S!* 361) From one point of view the image is of decomposition and disappearance, but the terms evoke a material freedom as well: her pelvis acquires a shock of new life, her skeleton is released from the form it was bound into. Mama Weeds is sprung from her human form here: her morphology is reimagined by the agentive wind and weeds that blow it open.

Both of Ava's encounters give her a numinous link to the nonhuman, albeit focalized through human figures. Ghost-channeling as Ossie conceives of it is, in light of these encounters, wrongly anthropocentric. Ava's human specters, hybrid spirit-material presences, open onto nonhuman worlds; supernatural encounters are necessarily nonhuman encounters, and the supernatural is the filter through which Ava is able to glimpse fragments of the truth about the swamp and the natural world in general. Unlike the ghost of the dredgeman and Ossie's other spectral associates, who are depicted as artifacts of a static past, these numinous brushes point both ways, to the past and toward the future, a dynamic orientation: rather than claiming that *there is* "something more mysterious," or that there *was*, Ava theorizes that "something more mysterious might be happening." Her hedged belief is in something mysterious that is still realizing its shape, a

force on the move, yet to come. What this seems to be, however, is not a metaphysical crossed-out god or an anthropocentric personal one ("an elderly mainland guy on a throne," Ava says, as if this vision of God may suffice on the dryland but not in the swamp [*S!* 223]): it is the additive, virtualized reality of the rule-collapsing swamp itself, the pressure of which Ava can feel "deep inland." An oncoming nature that defies natural rules shows itself through the swamp revenants.

There is not necessarily solace in these glimpses, though there are moments in which Ava can use this partial understanding of the natural world's agency to her advantage. Further, though they do not provide resolutions, these moments of mystery reactivate and reassert traumas and injustices on human and nonhuman scales because the victims of these wrongs have continued presence in the swamp, a presence inseparable from the stuff of the swamp itself. The virtualized swamp's ability to keep these unredressed wrongs at least alive and awake stands in contrast to the (at times literally) soporific way that the dryland dispenses with them. Ossie's unhappy spirits are cast out, we learn, and her "powers" muted, by psychiatric drugs that leave her asleep for much of the family's first dryland year, after which, Ava surmises, she learned "[l]ike me[…]to occult her own deep weirdness." (*S!* 396) Against the occultation that the rational city demands as the girls grow up, a combination of acceptance and denial, the swamp insists on the acknowledgment and commemoration of unrightable wrongs. This process is necessarily uncomfortable and points to no easy remedies, but nonetheless validates the suffering of victims by holding it open, allowing it, by the hybrid natural-supernatural means the swamp makes possible, to be always present. The supernatural persistence of these victims, the novel suggests, allows for a fuller and more just accounting of history. Homeschooled in accordance with the ghostly logic of swamp history, Ava acquires an understanding of the work of the historical record that is based around commemorating forgotten, unrecorded sufferings of the socially disenfranchised: "[b]lack pioneers, creek Indians, moonshiners, women, 'disappeared' boy soldiers who deserted their army camps." "[T]o be a true

historian," Ava concludes, "you had to mourn amply and well." (*S!* 250) Ava mourns across time, without a statute of limitations, and without ontological boundaries; her sense of loss extends to the swamp and follows the swamp from its past into its dim future.

Swamp historicism works along its own timelines: the past, and the future as well, are made present in the swamp because of multiple temporal disjunctions that set it off from or disorient linear, human-marked time. Some of these disjunctions are supernatural ghosts, while some of them are produced by wholly natural processes: fossilization, geological upheaval. Their effects, however, are similar in keeping various histories active and in view, and the natural processes are described in terms that bleed into the supernatural: they appear to violate mortality, evolution, climate. Ava's account of the swamp insists upon these various nonhuman time systems. Like the Fresh Kills landfill or the Internet wasteland, the flotsam and jetsam of all eras washes up in the swamp, from Ava's mother's clothing to fossils of African fauna. Incommensurable timelines are forced together, allowing for encounters from synchronic human and nonhuman pasts. Repeated narratorial assertions that the swamp is "haunted" – "actually a very crowded place," according to Ossie (*S!* – allow the novel to gesture at other human inhabitants, including the persecuted and murdered Seminoles who are reportedly still present in spirit form, as well as the desperate Depression-era dredgemen who entrance Ossie. A supernatural buzz attaches even to natural, material remnants of previous times, which turn up – or, it sometimes seems, present themselves – with uncanny and unlikely timing. Ava's mother's lost dress shows up on the mysterious swamp woman. Walking in familiar territory, Ava and Ossie stumble across the 1930's dredge boat that they have previously never seen, its contents intact, an unsettling material encounter that touches off Ossie's paranormal romance.

Many of these time distortions between the swamp and the dryland in *Swamplandia!* are deeper and less human-scaled than Maxine's, however. Generational slippage can hardly register in a landscape where it seems that geological epochs long over on the dryland have yet to pass completely. Evolutionary timelines accelerate and dilate variously. The alligators Ava's family raises are figured as violations of natural and temporal order, as well as avatars of the grudge-holding swamp's animus. The alligators are characterized as an of evolutionary lapse or stall, living "fossils" that have refused, as if by sheer force of will, to change. Ava's father reminds her sternly that an alligator is "a no-shit dinosaur," (*S!* 19) and a sign cautions tourists that "AN ALLIGATOR IS AN ANACHRONISM THAT CAN KILL YOU!" (*S!* 16) This evolutionary truculence allows them, in Ava's description, to function as repositories for the swamp's aggrieved affect, which seems to crystallize in their sudden attacks: "[A]n alligator can hoard its violence for millions of years." (*S!* 18)Clashing with this characterization of the swamp as ancient, however, Ava's brother Kiwi emphasizes its relative newness: the Floridian peninsula is a latecomer "[a]ccording to the geologic clock." (*S!* 239) The swamp is a palimpsestic assembly of all the inhabitants it has ever had; it is temporally and cosmologically thick.

Deep and crowded time has the effect of expanding moral subjecthood beyond humans. Animals, plants, and whole ecosystems are figured as capable of being wronged, of having moral standing, regardless even of the timeline to which they belong; there is not a statute of limitations because the human and nonhuman dead as well as the living persist in the swamp. The entire natural world is framed in at times rather unsubtle supernatural moralistic terms that indict humanity's violence against and callous exploitation of nature. This moralistic, theological framing begins with the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse that Ava mentions and is followed through with the creation of the World of Darkness amusement park. As its crowning attraction, World of Darkness boasts small planes of its own to take tourists outside of the park on a "tour of ecological devastation" over the

swamp, onto which park publicity maps the waters of the Greek underworld: the "Floridian Styx" where you can "ache for lost species of flowers and trees for twenty minutes and[…]find 'Swamp Acheron' and 'New Lethe,' and then fly back." (*S!* 178) In tribute to the swamp's dark history, the park pilots are blithely called the Pilots of the Apocalypse as well, mixing Judeo-Christian theology with Greek. This millennialism is more than just analogical. Like *Bleeding Edge's* Hashslingrz, the park corporation plans to expand to tours of the melting Arctic as well: the real end of the world as humans know it is commercialized here. Tourists are encouraged to see the devastated world as simply an extension of World of Darkness, one more toy environment for the diversion of human beings. The entire natural, nonhuman world takes on the role of wronged and silenced victim here, a role reinforced by the refrain of "'We love the World!'" that World of Darkness tourists are encouraged to shout out at the top of the park's giant slide. The phrase recalls John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world…"), and Jesus Christ's sacrifice on behalf of humanity, but here it becomes an ironic condemnation of humanity and perhaps of gods as well, a comment on human indifference to the planet. The planet itself becomes a moral subject, and an implacable one, as Ava's reckoning of history – punctuated by invasive species, hurricanes, and floods – testifies. Tacit in the juxtaposition of environmental ruin with the frivolity of World of Darkness is the promise of Dantean contrapasso to be visited upon environmental sinners.

The expansion of theological moral responsibility opens up the possibility to think forms of resistance otherwise inconceivable, to rework received narratives in ways that cut "the sea-glare of the 'official, historical'" record (*S!* 250). The validation of injustices across categories, as well as the swamp's established tendency to subvert natural rules, encourage a rebellious, aggrieved attitude toward the social and natural orders that can be freeing. Ava's sense of justice reaches into parts of the natural world and identifies injustices in areas that are typically regarded as outside morality because they are "natural." Her underworld quest is driven by her fury at doctors' "cooing"

assurances that there is "no justice and no logic" in the fact that her mother becomes "sicker than a person should ever be allowed to get." (*S!* 8) The sentiment is childlike, but the novel takes it seriously, allowing Ava to follow it toward a wider conception of human and nonhuman moral agency. Though haunted by the thought that her rape is her own fault, she is able to frame the rape, in the moment and in her retrospective narration of it, as an injustice against her because of a capacity to identify with nonhumans that she understands as moral subjects, capable of suffering and evaluable in terms of right and wrong. The description of the rape opens with a seemingly utterly unrelated memory of watching an educational slide show titled *The Silently Screaming World*, scenes of natural destruction and competition: "a wall of solid flame in the Andes, Alaskan glacial collisions, the great thumbprint of an old comet in the Yucatán," all disquietingly soundless. The narrative moves without transition from this memory to the memory of the rape, during which a likewise silenced Ava, lying on the ground, turns her gaze to the nearby plants overcome by swarming ants. Her fear and suffering, even in the midst of dissociating "body-deafness," is evoked indirectly through remembered images of natural violence and then the silent, inscrutable natural world around her. She is able to tell the story as one of suffering rather than guilt, to work her way backward to empathy for herself, because of an empathy for a nonhuman that she understands as capable of "screaming," (*S!* 328) however inaudibly.

Conclusion

The fantastic recoverability of other timelines and fantastic engagement with nonhumans that magical virtual realism enables is not inherently liberating or reparative for humans in S*wamplandia!* Deepening time and expanding moral subjecthood is not without liabilities, one of which is that the scale can effectively become so large that human injustices are trivialized. Ava's history, incorporating nonhuman agents as its real movers and shakers, risks complacency even as it

recognizes victims forgotten in other reckonings: the black laborers who drown "by the thousands" during a 1935 hurricane, the dispossessed Seminoles, individuals like Mama Weeds. Despite these nods to racial violence, class exploitation, and the theft of indigenous land, white narrator Ava's contention that no one in the swamp has been there long because geologically speaking even Florida itself is "a newcomer to these parts" risks equating the forced migration and genocide of the Seminoles, the economically compelled migration of the laborers, and Ava's family's willing move. Considered on such a vast scale, Ava effectively argues, the Bigtrees can call themselves "an 'indigenous species'" because "every human in the Ten Thousand Islands was a recent arrival." (*S!* 239) This glib deep-time reasoning allows Ava to avoid confronting the injustices inherent in her family's occupation of the swamp, and to ignore the implications of her family's appropriation of American Indian identity, a detail treated as merely comic and pathetic. While the point may be to decenter humans in narrative, the fact remains that this move risks reproducing, through its nonhuman focus, the at best superficial and at worst dismissive treatment of historical injustices perpetrated against black and indigenous Americans.

Bleeding Edge encounters a related problem in its attempt to engage a wider spectrum of cognitive players: while it grants a postmortem voice to those wronged and murdered, it risks treating nonhuman players instrumentally, a treatment conditioned by the projection of social inequality in American meatspace onto the virtual world. DeepArcher is populated by a number of staff, as it were, who seem to not be avatars at all but to exist completely in code. We do not know the extent to which these entities are cognitive or conscious, and their instrumental, objectifying treatment by the human characters and the text itself is supported and deepened by their human programmers' choice to depict them as attractive, servile women, encouraging analogic treatment on behalf of sexist human DeepArcher users. Neither Maxine nor the text itself is particularly interested in or critical of the fact that the virtual attendants on the DeepArcher "train" are made to look like

women "out of Lucas and Justin's beach-babe fantasies." (*BE* 76) An unremarked sexism informs the meatspace Lucas and Justin as well: their home workspace is papered with Carmen Electra posters and Justin's wife, an apparent inspiration for the train staff, enters only to supply food and drugs. DeepArcher's striking signature graphic, the eponymous and ambiguously female Archer herself, is the work of a (probably underage) woman, unpaid, uncredited, dated, and dumped by the fortyish Lucas. Women are instrumentalized and objectified by the DeepArchitects; the train wait staff are made "women" and objectified because they are created to be instrumentalized. Though Lucas and Justin emphasize the degree to which DeepArcher is autonomous and outside their control, and despite the explosion of content creators later, the fact remains that it is conceived and initiated by men steeped in a subculture that is presented as particularly misogynistic. Though we see DeepArcher through the eyes of a female character, Maxine's introduction and access to DeepArcher via rapidly changing passwords is overseen by these men.

Beyond these social justice problems, the proliferation of nonhuman agents involved in the magical virtual world introduces more uncertainty into the stakes of magical virtual creep. As I argue at the conclusion of my first chapter, the radical "democracy" of water that Leopold Bloom admires suggests that the politics to come may involve a scope beyond the human, and that individuals may not be recognizable as unified agents in this politics – subject, instead, to the workings of materials in and on them; animals; weather; artificial intelligence; and even their own unbidden world-shaping desires. Magical virtual realism extrapolates upon the transformation of reality wrought by its ubiquitous technological mediation, imagining a complete marriage of meatspace and the virtual that can work miraculous changes upon the meatspace world. Narrative experiments such as Joyce's stream-of-consciousness (the fantastic effects of which I discuss in Chapter 1), wherein the solid and present dissolves and the phantasmal coalesces into presence with the rise and fall of thought, thus seem to anticipate straightforward attempts to narrate technologically-mediated life. Human minds

ultimately become other here, unpredictable and uncontrollable. When technology gradually produces a world in which "real" events asymptotically approach the breakneck surreal pace and tenor of the mutable subjective world of human thought and imagination all of living, not just thinking, can become dizzyingly free-associative. Anything thought can be called up onscreen, even things long forgotten or concealed; a person remembered can be a person suddenly, mysteriously present; connections emerge among disparate pieces of information, individuals, and strands of memory. The laws of the physical world come into uncertain conflict with the combined power of individual thought and technological information transmission. The result is, in magical virtual realist fiction, the inauguration of a new spirit world.

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